Michael Dred, Detective

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MICHAEL DRED

DETECTIVE

THE UNRAVELLING OF A MYSTERY OF TWENTY YEARS

MARIE CONNOR LEIGHTON AND
ROBERT LEIGHTON

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MICHAEL DRED, DETECTIVE

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"I had nearly fallen over him." [*Frontispiece.*

MICHAEL DRED

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THE UNRAVELLING OF A MYSTERY OF TWENTY YEARS

BY

MARIE CONNOR LEIGHTON AND
ROBERT LEIGHTON

NEW YORK: BRENTANO'S
LONDON GRANT RICHARDS
1899

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MICHAEL DRED, DETECTIVE.

THE UNRAVELLING OF A MYSTERY OF TWENTY YEARS.

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CHAPTER I.

AN AFFAIR OF THE HEART.

"Ah, good-morning, Dred! You are punctual. It was very good of you, with so many claims on your time, to give me an interview so promptly and at so short notice."

"You say you want my advice—eh?"

"Yes. I'm going down to Luxmore to-day, and—well, the fact is, I want your advice on a very delicate matter—an affair of the heart."

The man who was speaking had flushed under the bronze of his delicate skin. He was a tall, strong, and yet gracefully built young fellow of twenty-nine, with deep blue eyes, and light brown hair that had the seaman's curl in it. His features were handsome, and his manners expressed an almost exuberant gaiety and energy. His name was Wingrove—Paul Wingrove, first lieutenant of Her Majesty's ship *Berenice*, now lying in Plymouth Sound, just home from a short period of foreign service.

The man to whom he spoke, and who had come by appointment to meet him here at the United Service Club, was in appearance a singular personage. He was close upon forty years of age, of medium height, and thin, with a large head thickly covered with short, brownish-black hair. He walked with a slight limp, the result of an accident met with in the course of his extensive travels. His face, sharp-featured and somewhat sallow of skin, expressed a strange mixture of subtlety, watchfulness, and keen intellectuality. His eyes were deep-set and piercing. His manners had the ease and never-failing graciousness of perfect gentlemanhood.

He was Michael Dred, a man world-famous for his preternatural acuteness and success in the detection and investigation of crime.

Why was it that as he listened to the bright young naval officer his face visibly clouded? The words, "an affair of the heart," seemed to have displeased him.

"I am afraid I shall not be able to help you, Wingrove," he said drily.

"I don't want your help exactly," smiled the young man, seating himself. "I only ask your opinion. You've been an intimate friend of the Luxmores for years—Lord Luxmore told me one day that he regarded you as practically his business adviser—and I want to know whether you think there's any chance of my winning his consent to his elder daughter's marriage with me?"

"His elder daughter Lena?" cried Michael Dred sharply.

Paul Wingrove nodded, colouring more deeply than before.

"Yes," he said, in a low voice, "I've loved her for a long time—ever since I first saw her, I believe. I thought you knew of it?"

"I did not know," sullenly rejoined Michael Dred. "Does she encourage you?"

"She has led me to hope for her."

In his natural embarrassment, the young lieutenant did not look at the detective's face. His downbent eye had been caught by the milky light of a curious scarf-pin that Michael Dred wore. It was a beautiful opal heart, surrounded with large brilliants.

It happened that, Paul Wingrove's eyes being fixed on the opal heart, he missed seeing the expression that his last words had brought into the detective's face.

Anger and pain succeeded each other on those ascetic features. Michael Dred gazed at the bright young fellow before him as if he would read his soul, even through his drooping lids.

"I can't wait any longer," continued Lieutenant Wingrove, unconscious of this powerful and wizard-like scrutiny; "I'm going to speak to Lord Luxmore to-day. It's bitterly hard to love a woman and be afraid all the time that Fate will take her away from you. I know I'm not worthy of Lena from the world's point of view, but it shall go hard if I don't make myself deserving of her. I mean to fly my own pennant before I've done."

"Rather shadowy prospects to set before a father," observed Michael Dred.

"I'm afraid they are," agreed the young lieutenant ruefully. "A great deal will depend on whether the old lord likes me personally or not. Does he like me? You should know."

"Even if he likes you as a friend, he may not like you as a son-in-law," replied Michael Dred. He spoke coldly, but Paul Wingrove, in his agitation of mind, did not notice this. He only felt that his adviser's remarks were not comforting.

"You don't give me much hope," he said, looking up half-reproachfully. "But at least you will promise me this—to say a good word for me if Lord Luxmore should consult you on the matter?"

For a moment the detective's face was cold and stony as marble. Then he said, deep in his throat:

"I will. I shall be writing to him this afternoon. How long leave have you?"

"Twenty-four hours."

"I see you came round by the Cape."

Paul Wingrove started.

"How could you know that?" he cried.

"By the ring on your finger," calmly answered the detective. "It is a new one, and those native-worked rings only come from the West Coast. You probably took in coal at Freetown, Sierra Leone."

"We stopped there by a mere chance," said Paul. "The ring was given me there."

He felt a sudden shrinking from the man whose insight gave him this power.

They parted on the steps of the club. Lieutenant Wingrove hailed a hansom, and drove at once to the railway-station to catch the one o'clock train for Luxmore.

As his coming was not expected, there was no carriage to meet him, and he had to walk the two miles between the station and Luxmore Park. He walked quickly, inspired by the keen October air, and by his eagerness to meet again the handsome girl whom he adored. Many months had passed since he had seen her last.

He entered the Luxmore domain by the gate nearest the station—a small gate with which was connected a bell that could be heard at the gamekeeper's cottage close by. Knowing his way perfectly, he did not ring this bell, but hastened on along the narrow grassy path that led through the most thickly-wooded portion of the magnificent park. His heart sang as he went. The autumn glory of the trees seemed to harmonise with his glowing hopes. Presently he turned aside into a broader path, that led round to the main entrance of the mansion.

The present Lord Luxmore, who was somewhat miserly and had no son, had refused to spend a penny on the improvement of property which, after his death, would fall to a rascally nephew.

In spite of his longing to see his idolised Lena after an absence of some months, Paul Wingrove, on the opening of the massive entrance door, inquired for Lord Luxmore. Bell, the old butler, informed him that his lordship was at present enjoying his afternoon sleep, and must not be disturbed. But if Lieutenant Wingrove would wait an hour—

Paul interrupted him with a hasty acquiescence and was shown into the drawing-room, where Lena and her sister Beatrix were seated together.

Both these girls were lovely, although in widely different ways. The elder, Lena, was tall and finely made, with handsome features, dark hair, a pale olive complexion, and eyes of changing shades of bluish grey. The younger, Beatrix, seventeen years of age, was small and fair, with merry roguish eyes and pink and white cheeks. Both sisters were daintily dressed. What he called the extravagance of his daughters was one of Lord Luxmore's standing subjects of complaint.

"Paul!" exclaimed the elder girl, springing from her seat as the lieutenant was announced. "Oh, Paul, this is delightful! I knew the *Berenice* had come home, but we did not expect you yet. How well you are looking!"

She made a sign to her sister, and, after a few words of greeting, the lively Beatrix obediently quitted the room.

"We came into port five days ago," he said, taking her two small hands in his strong, brown ones, "and I succeeded in getting twenty-four hours' leave of absence. Not long, is it, for a man whose heart is always so far, far away from his ship?"

"Where is your heart then, Mr. Wingrove?" asked

the bewitching girl, with a playful assumption of ignorance and coquetry.

"Oh, Lena," answered Paul, his glad young face growing passionately earnest, "always here with you. Every day, every hour of the day, all the seasons through. And at night, Lena, on deck, in storm and darkness—oh, then my heart is with you most of all!"

He saw her eyes darken and glisten with tears.

"Why, Lena," he exclaimed in surprise, "my darling! You are more serious than you used to be."

"I am so glad you have come back," she murmured. "I have missed you very much this time."

"You have missed me?" cried Paul Wingrove delightedly. "You tell me so frankly—you, who used to scorn me and drive me nearly to despair with your coldness and pride!" He looked at her graceful young figure and radiant, uplifted face. The scent of her hair, the delicacy of her hands, the elegance of her dress, all charmed and thrilled him. "Oh, Lena, how happy you have made me!"

"I thought I did not love you," she said softly, "but I was mistaken. When you went away last year I grew tired of frivolity and the empty glitter and glare of society. I found myself thinking of you, wishing you were near me. When once, by accident, I met a man who had seen you on board the *Berenice*, I could have cried for joy. I was angry with myself when I first discovered these feelings towards you. But anger would not drive them away."

The handsome face of the young naval officer shone with his joy. His eyes rested on her with a tender, reverent worship that quickened the beating of her heart.

"Nothing shall part us now," he said, with a ring of manly resoluteness in his tone. "Not even my unworthiness of you. Lena, I have something to tell you. Listen."

He led her to a cushioned window-seat, and they sat down side by side.

"I am going to speak to Lord Luxmore to-day—immediately. I cannot live any longer in this doubt. Sometimes when I am away from you I feel an anguish of jealousy, knowing that any man who pleases is still at liberty to try and win you. I must go boldly to your father, and tell him my position and my prospects. I am ambitious, and I am succeeding. I shall soon have a star on my epaulettes. And I mean to rise higher and higher until for your sake I have won the highest dignity a naval man can reach. For your sake, Lena, I will be brave, obedient, ready in emergencies, reckless of death—oh, yes, reckless of death, because Death will not dare to take me from you, dearest, in the midst of our happiness—"

She interrupted him with a laugh, looking admiringly, meanwhile, at his fair, sun-tanned face and stalwart figure.

"Surely Lena, dearest, your father cannot refuse you to me when he knows that I have your love?"

"I hope not," replied Miss Luxmore fervently. She was silent for a moment, as though some doubt or dread oppressed her.

One of the doors of the room opened, and Mrs. Vayne came in. Mrs. Vayne was a middle-aged and haughty, but well-preserved lady, the widow of a colonel, and a distant connection of the Luxmores, and, since the death of Lady Luxmore, she had lived at the Park as its mistress and as the chaperon of the girls.

"Lord Luxmore is awake now," she announced, after briefly greeting the visitor. "He will be very glad to see you."

A peculiar hardness in her tone jarred on Paul Wingrove's ear. Looking up, he noticed that the smile had died away from Lena's lips. Mrs. Vayne's mere presence seemed to blight and shrivel the rich promise of their love.

With a beating heart Paul left the drawing-room. At the door he stopped and looked back. Lena Luxmore still sat where he had left her, a picture in old-rose colour against the dim afternoon light that flowed in at the window behind her.

CHAPTER II.

THE ENCOUNTER.

THE library in which Lord Luxmore sat was somewhat gloomy with the gloom of the sinking day. The room itself was sombre, with a carved black oak ceiling and black oak panellings half-way up the walls. Added to this, the four windows, two of which opened into the grounds, were heavily draped with dark curtains. But the light was still clear enough for the two men to see each other's faces across the whole length of the room.

At the moment of Wingrove's entrance the old peer was seated in an easy-chair beside the fireplace—the same easy-chair probably in which he had recently been dozing—and a glass of some wine or cordial stood on a small table at his right hand.

He was a majestic old man, in his sixtieth year, gaunt and lean, with hair still dark, and the heavy jaws of obstinacy. He rose as Paul entered, and greeted him with as near an approach to cheeriness as was possible to his peevish nature.

"You look up your friends promptly, Wingrove. It is not a week yet since your ship came home."

Paul was agitated. He plunged at once into the subject near his heart.

"It was more than friendship that brought me, Lord Luxmore; it was love."

"Love!" cried the peer, starting in his seat. "Love, did you say?"

He turned his severe gaze full on the tall, handsome fellow before him. Paul did not flinch under it, though the light from the opposite window showed it to be both malevolent and fierce.

"I have come to ask you for the hand of your elder daughter. I love her sincerely and devotedly, and I have won her love in return. I feel—I know—that in your eyes I must seem unworthy. But—"

"So!" exclaimed Lord Luxmore angrily. "This is why she refused Mountstuart in the spring; Lord Mountstuart, a better man than you will ever be if you live to be a hundred. It is for the sake of such worthless rascals as you and my headstrong nephew that daughters flout their fathers and ruin their own future. It is outrageous, sir—outrageous," repeated the old man, bringing his hand down heavily upon the table beside him, "that at my time of life I should be pestered in this way by my cur of a nephew and you."

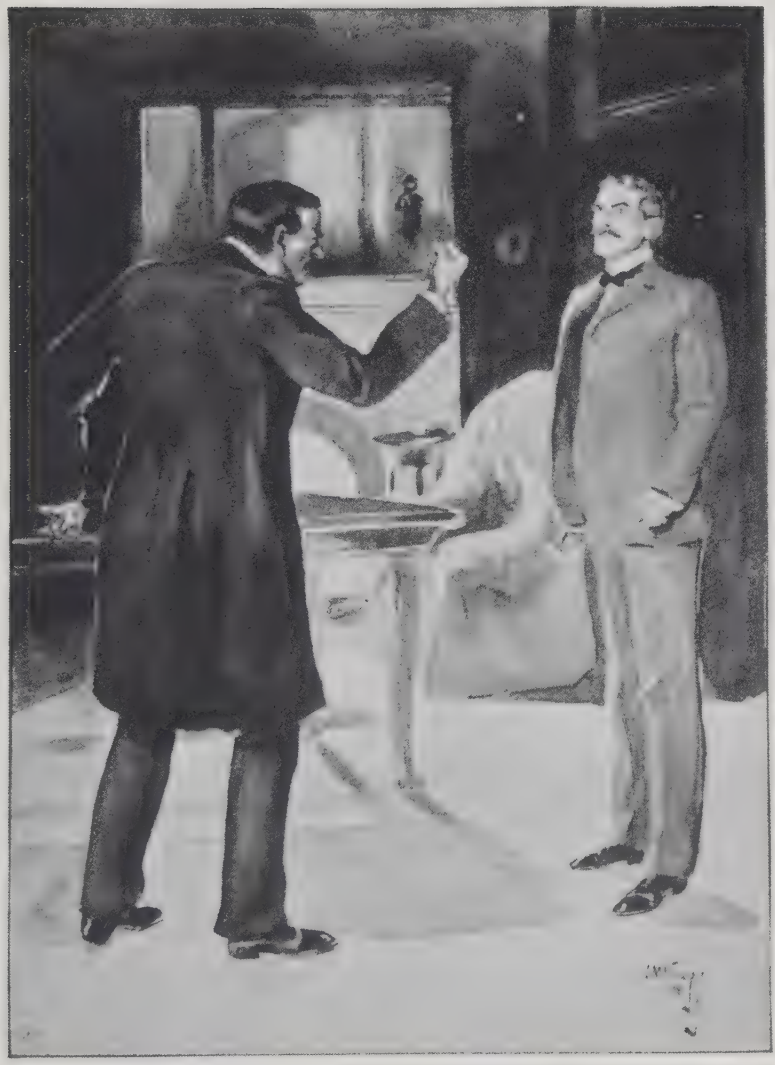
"My lord!" remonstrated Paul Wingrove; his bronzed face had grown red under the outburst of the old man's wrath.

"Silence!" thundered the peer furiously; "silence, I say! You're a fortune-hunter, sir—a sneaking fortune-hunter, and I forbid you ever to see my daughter again—either of my daughters. Do you hear? I forbid you to enter this house again. Isn't it enough that I have bad, extravagant, undutiful children, without such as you coming about them to make them worse?"

The naval officer recoiled a step. The red in his cheeks had deepened to crimson. His clear blue eyes had lost their smile and gained a sombre flash. His blood ran hot in his veins.

Erect and noble, he looked fixedly at the old fellow's rage-distorted face. Oh, if this man had been younger, and not the father of the woman he loved!

"You insult me," he said, with the ominous calmness



"You're a fortune-hunter, sir—a sneaking fortune-hunter!" [Page 10.

of forced self-control. "I am no fortune-hunter. If your daughter would so far bless me as to accept my comparative poverty, it would be the greatest joy of my life to have her dependent upon me."

"Dependent upon a penniless sailor!" jeered Lord Luxmore. The jeer stung his hearer to the quick. "Insult you, did you say? Nobody could do that. A man who tries to steal another man's daughter for the sake of her money is impervious to insult." His voice thickened to hoarseness in his uncontrollable fury. "Leave the house, sir, at once! And, lest your absence should not sufficiently protect me against you, understand that to-night I send for my lawyer and make a will, stipulating that not one penny shall ever go to my daughter Lena if she should be fool enough and undutiful enough to marry you."

CHAPTER III.

RECALLED.

SOME moments afterwards, Paul Wingrove silently issued from the library, closed the door behind him, and walked down the soft-carpeted corridor towards the great hall. He was agitated, and his breath came short and fast. Unconsciously his feet went the right way; almost unconsciously, too, he noticed that the house was in semi-darkness. Dusk had fallen, and no lights had yet been brought. No servants were about.

At the end of the corridor he stopped. Should he go again into the drawing-room and try to see Lena before he went away?

He decided to make the attempt.

He pushed open the drawing-room door and went in. The great room was silent, and lighted only by the quivering, fantastic firelight. The window-seat that Miss Luxmore had occupied was now vacant. He called her name softly, but no answer came.

At that moment he thought he heard a movement in the library—that dark, ghostly room where all his hopes had been stricken low. It was as though Lord Luxmore had risen from his seat and looked out to see if his late visitor had gone. Then the door seemed to close again, and once more all was silent.

Hastily he took up his hat and cane, and passed between the arras hangings into the front hall. Here he saw a man's figure bending over the fire. The man

looked up, startled at his sudden and hasty approach. It was the butler.

"Is that you, Bell?" asked Paul.

"Yes, sir; I was jest goin' to take in a light to the library. I'd 'a taken one in before, honely, from the sound of his voice, 'is lordship seemed to be hupset at somethin'. He do get ruffled like that sometimes, sir. But he seems quiet enough now, sir—very quiet—don't 'e?"

"Yes," returned Paul hurriedly, as he put on his hat and crossed towards the door. "Perhaps you had better not disturb him at present."

"Why, you aren't going already, Mr. Wingrove, are you, sir?" exclaimed the old butler in surprise. "I thought you was to stay to dinner."

"No," said Paul, in a dull voice. "Tell Mrs. Vayne I had to go back to town by the six-thirty train."

And with these words he went out into the darkness.

Crossing the gravel of the carriage drive, he looked back at the great house from which he had been so unceremoniously dismissed. Through the dining-room window he saw the dark, portly form of Mrs. Vayne standing near the sideboard, upon which stood a large lighted lamp and an array of shining silver.

Not wishing to be seen by her leaving the place in so ignominious a manner, Paul plunged in among the trees that bordered the lawn. The fallen leaves rustled under his feet. Here, hidden amid the shadows, he turned once more with a last faint hope of seeing the woman he loved. There was no sign of her.

Two or three minutes later, as he was walking at highest speed down the path that led to the gate nearest the station—the path which a short time before he had trodden with such high hopes—he thought he heard quick footsteps behind him. Had

Lena discovered that he had gone, and sent a messenger to recall him? Or—

He stopped and looked back. There was no one but himself in the narrow avenue; and yet he could almost have sworn that he saw a dark figure suddenly disappear behind one of the thick elms. At the time, however, he thought little of this. Redoubling his speed, he hastened on.

He reached the railway-station breathless, but in good time. He had, indeed, a few minutes to wait, and lit a cigar while on the platform before the train was signalled.

From this point there is no need to follow his movements minutely. He went down to Plymouth by the nine o'clock train from Paddington, and was on board the *Berenice* at eight o'clock in the morning.

His brother officers started at sight of him. He was a changed man from the bright young fellow who had left them twenty-four hours before.

He had donned his naval uniform, and was promenading the starboard side of the quarter-deck, when a pinnace from shore came alongside. A few minutes afterwards, one of the petty officers saluted him and handed him a telegram. The message, which had been despatched from London at seven o'clock on that same morning, was characteristically brief. It ran as follows:

"*Return at once to Luxmore. Urgent.—Michael Dred.*"

Paul Wingrove stood amazed. What could this mean? And how did Michael Dred know that he had rejoined his ship? Vaguely, causelessly, he shuddered at the thought of this man.

For a moment his mind wavered between alarm and a sudden sweet hope. Had anything happened to Lena? Or could it be that her sweet persuasions

had bent her father's iron will? But in either case how was Michael Dred mixed up with the matter?

He knew the great detective well enough to be convinced that he would not send such a telegram without grave reasons. It was assuredly for no trifling cause that Michael Dred was thus imperative.

Anxiously pacing the deck, the young lieutenant reflected that perhaps Dred himself had interceded for him with Lord Luxmore. He remembered with a throb of joy the detective's statement that he intended to write to the old nobleman. It was possible that the letter had been influential in his favour. But, whether or not such were the explanation, this summons to Luxmore showed that the irascible father had revoked his decree of dismissal.

So Lieutenant Wingrove obtained fresh leave, and without delay he started once more for London. Racked between hope and fear, his yearning young heart turned naturally to the brighter chance. It must be that Lord Luxmore had relented. What father could resist the appeal of a daughter so lovely and sweet as Lena? He smiled to himself as the express flew along past the now familiar scenery. He foresaw so many years of glorious happiness to come.

It was in the afternoon when the train reached Swindon. The early editions of the evening papers had just arrived. Buying one in order to distract his mind from its strain of suspense, he immediately encountered the following paragraphs. They seemed to stand out from the sheet as though printed in fire:

SUDDEN DEATH OF LORD LUXMORE.

MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES.

It is with deep regret that we announce the sudden death of Algernon Sidmouth Luxmore, seventh Baron Luxmore, who died at his country seat last evening of heart disease.

(Here followed a brief biographical notice of the deceased nobleman, culled from "Men of the Time.") The peerage descends to the deceased nobleman's nephew, Mr. Reginald Luxmore, of Bevenden.

LATER.

A *Press Association* telegram states that since the first intimation of Lord Luxmore's death some mysterious circumstances have been discovered which point to the probability that there has been foul play. On entering her father's library at half-past six last evening, the Hon. Lena Luxmore, eldest daughter of the respected peer, was shocked to find her father lying prone upon the carpet. She immediately summoned aid, and restoratives were applied, but without avail. On Dr. Hale, the family physician, being called, he discovered that his lordship had been dead at least half an hour. Dr. Hale refused at the time to express any definite opinion as to the cause of death, but denied that it could be heart disease. Mr. Dred, the well-known detective, has been summoned to Luxmore, and arrests are expected.

The paper slipped from Paul Wingrove's fingers. His face had grown pale with consternation and horror. Great Heaven! It was not the appeals of love that had bent that inflexible will; it was death that had made it impotent.

His brain was in a whirl. He could not think; the mystery was as yet too deep. His generous heart was conscious of one impulse only—to go to his loved Lena and comfort her. Throughout the seventy-seven miles that remained of that long journey his state of mind bordered on desperation. "Lena! Lena!" was the one dumb cry of his straining heart, that overflowed with tenderness for her great sorrow. In his intense eagerness even the Flying Dutchman seemed to crawl.

Paddington at last! He made a rush for a cab to convey him to the Luxmore train. In his haste and agitation, he did not observe that two men had awaited his arrival on the Great Western platform—that they closely watched every one of his movements

—and that, following him in another cab, they finally travelled down to Luxmore in the same train as himself.

Lieutenant Paul Wingrove was happily unconscious of the vortex into which he was hastening.

CHAPTER IV.

SUSPICION.

In his agitation Paul Wingrove hurried nearly at a running pace up the avenue to Luxmore Park. The great house, tree-guarded in its gloomy hollow, seemed to have assumed a darker aspect. A brooding silence clung about it, strangely in keeping with the tragedy that had been enacted within its walls.

A slow horror crept into Paul's heart as he approached. The door was opened to him, not by Bell, the butler, but by a parlour-maid. Within the darkened house was deep silence—the awe-struck hush of the presence of death, made yet more awful here by that same lurking horror that Paul had felt as he drew near the mansion.

With noiseless footsteps he followed the parlour-maid to the drawing-room. He fancied that she looked at him curiously, suspiciously. Murmuring something about Mrs. Vayne coming, she left him. With an oppressed heart he sank down into a chair and waited alone in this cold, dim room, which yesterday had been full of warmth and light. Only yesterday Lena and Beatrix Luxmore had sat there smiling and happy, and he himself had spent here the sweetest moments that his young life had hitherto known. And now—

Someone was entering from the conservatory. It was Mrs. Vayne. She was in black, but did not look grief-stricken. Far from being sorrowful, her face was absolutely statue-like in its passiveness. It was

evident that she had not been told of Mr. Wingrove's arrival, for upon becoming aware of his presence she showed astonishment, and, as Paul fancied, a slight displeasure. He had risen and begun to speak, but she did not seem disposed to listen. With a brief "Good afternoon, Mr. Wingrove," she haughtily quitted the room.

Paul wondered at her manner. Not even the state of consternation and confusion into which the household had been thrown could justify this almost rude treatment of him. But his heart was too full of Lena for his thoughts to dwell long on the demeanour of Mrs. Vayne. When would his beloved one come, that he might comfort her?

A shadow fell across the floor. He looked up eagerly. Not Lena, but Beatrix Luxmore had entered the room. The young girl's face showed traces of long and bitter weeping. She, too, recoiled at sight of him, with a look in her eyes which he could not understand.

"You here, Mr. Wingrove?" she exclaimed coldly. Her voice grew colder still as she added, "I thought Mrs. Vayne was in this room. Have you seen her?"

"She passed through a moment ago," Paul answered. "She went towards the inner drawing-room."

"Thank you," returned Beatrix. And, with a slight inclination of the head, she, too, went out.

Paul stood amazed. He had known Beatrix Luxmore ever since her childhood. As a tiny girl of two years old she had sat on the knee of his father, the venerable Bishop of C——; yet now, in this supreme hour of horror and anguish, she spoke no word to him of her sorrow, of her fears. She looked at him as though he were a stranger, one who had no right to be in the house at such a time.

What could it mean? What change had come over them all?

Perplexed and pained, he paced the room uneasily. The silence and suspense were growing terribly oppressive to him.

"Paul!"

At last there came the voice he longed to hear. He turned quickly. Lena Luxmore, black-robed and pale, was crossing the room towards him.

"Oh, Lena, my dearest—my poor stricken love!"

In an instant she was in his arms. Her face was hidden against his shoulder, and her whole form shook with tearless sobs. His own eyes were misty as they rested on her bowed head.

"Lena, darling," he whispered, "ask God to help you to bear it. He will if we ask Him earnestly. He has helped me many a time in danger on the sea. Dearest, it hurts me to see you grieve so. You, who are so young and innocent! Heaven knows, I would have given my life to spare you this."

The passionate tenderness in his voice made her look up.

"Oh, that terrible sight!" she cried. Her wild agonised voice broke the oppressive silence with startling suddenness. "I shall never forget it—never! I shall see it all my life."

He knew that she referred to the sight of her father's body lying prone upon the library floor.

"Hush, dear, hush!" he murmured soothingly. Her distress wrung his heart.

She said nothing more, but her eyes met his with a desperate trust and gratitude in their sombre depths.

The sight of her face alarmed him; it was white to the lips, and the features were hard and set. Unlike her sister, she did not seem to have wept at all.

A sudden remembrance made him draw back gently from her, while his own face changed, as though with sharp physical pain.

"Lena," he appealed huskily, "help me—tell me what I am to do. Your father," he lowered his voice,

'forbade me to see you again. In being here—in trying to comfort you—I am disobeying the dead. And yet I love you so! How can I keep from you in this time of trouble? Lena, you must be judge. Tell me what is right and I will do it, though my heart should break. It might bring a curse upon our love if—"

A low cry came from Lena's lips. Her eyes had turned towards the doorway. Paul Wingrove's glance, following hers, met the steady scrutiny of Michael Dred, who was standing motionless on the threshold of the room.

There was something in that scrutiny which made both the lovers shudder involuntarily. And yet the detective's face was impassive as marble.

Miss Luxmore was the first to recover herself.

"Ah, Mr. Dred!" she exclaimed. Strangely enough, she moved backward instead of advancing to greet the new-comer. "I forgot that you were coming by the five o'clock train."

Before they had realised her intention to leave them, she had glided from the room. Paul Wingrove and Michael Dred were alone together.

For an instant the two men faced each other in silence, as though uncertain of their mutual attitude.

"What a terrible affair!" exclaimed Paul at last.

"A change here since yesterday—eh?" remarked Dred, looking at the lieutenant significantly. "I take it that your mission was unsuccessful?"

"Yes," answered Paul sadly; "Lord Luxmore forbade me to enter the house again. And I would have stayed away for ever," he added fervently, "rather than come back under these awful conditions."

"I daresay," rejoined the detective. "The place cannot now be very agreeable to you."

There was something in his tone that made Paul look up sharply. But he did not speak. Michael Dred went on:

"I'm sorry to have put you to so much inconvenience by my telegram. But I assumed that you would have no difficulty in obtaining an extension of leave. And this occurrence cannot be ignored even for duty's sake. Your presence at the inquest is absolutely necessary."

"I suppose so," assented Paul, not realising what ominous meaning lay behind the detective's words. He studied Dred's face for a moment. Then, glancing swiftly round the room, he said, in a lowered voice, "But do you think it was *murder?*—not heart disease, or apoplexy? It is not possible that he could have been murdered in the few minutes that elapsed between my leaving him and his discovery by his daughter."

"It does not seem possible," returned Michael Dred, "and I have not myself a great belief in the rumour of foul play." He spoke in a careless tone, but with a peculiar half-smile on his lips that somewhat perplexed his hearer. "But somehow the idea has got abroad, and the newspapers are making a great fuss over the matter. Lord Luxmore's rank may account for that. In any case, very careful investigation will have to be made."

"When did you hear of the death?" asked Paul.

"Late last night. Mrs. Vayne telegraphed to me, giving Dr. Hale's opinion, and stating that you had left abruptly for Plymouth. The inquest will open at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. In the meantime I think you might take up your quarters at the Luxmore Arms. I'll see you there in the evening—eh?"

"Certainly," agreed Paul, surprised, nevertheless, at Dred's official tone, "although, indeed, I had supposed that I should remain here for the present. However, if you advise it, I will go to the inn."

"Simply because in such cases as this it is as well to have none but members of the family and household about," remarked Dred, turning away.

"Wait!" said Paul, laying his hand on the detective's arm. "Can I go in and see the body?"

"Impossible," answered Michael Dred. He had turned back quickly, and stood looking curiously at the lieutenant's frank and handsome face. "It is strange that you should wish to do so. No one can be allowed to enter the death-chamber until after the jury have viewed the body."

Paul took his way to the village inn. Unknown to himself, he was still carefully watched. And during a large part of the evening Michael Dred moved like a haunting spirit about the stricken house, speaking to no one, but watching all, listening to all, and making silent record of many things.

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CHAPTER V.

THE COMING STORM.

PROMPTLY at half-past nine on the following morning a waggonette arrived at the Hall, with twelve passengers of very varied external appearance. They were the Coroner's jury, selected with careful discrimination from among the intelligent ratepayers of the neighbourhood. The waggonette was followed by an open carriage, bringing the Coroner, a member of the press, and one or two other gentlemen.

The Coroner himself was a tall, somewhat irascible-looking, elderly man, with iron-grey hair, crisp side-whiskers, and a self-important manner. He wore a black frock-coat and an old-fashioned black silk neckcloth, that gave him a grim and funereal aspect.

He was received by Mrs. Vayne, who conducted him at once to the dining-room, where the inquiry was to be held. Here, laying a large notebook and a Justice's Manual upon the bare oak table, he gave a few directions as to the arrangement of the chairs, and saw that his own armchair was placed near the fireplace, where from the head of the table he would be able to see the witnesses as they took up their position opposite to him, with the light from the windows falling upon their faces.

During the next half-hour he was occupied with the jurymen in the gruesome task of viewing the late Lord Luxmore's body. In this interval there were several fresh arrivals of persons concerned in the proceedings.

"Gentlemen," began the Coroner, when the jury had been sworn, "you are to-day called upon to fulfil a most melancholy duty, and I trust that you will listen patiently and carefully to the evidence which is brought before you, and that you will weigh that evidence with calm and unbiassed minds. This is no ordinary case. The high rank of the deceased nobleman, and the great respect in which he was held, not only by his tenants and the inhabitants of this immediate neighbourhood, but also by the great mass of the community at large, will bring the attention of the whole country upon the result of your deliberations. I must ask you to set aside all thought of the painful rumours which have been circulated in regard to the circumstances of this death, and to base your conclusions solely upon the testimony of the witnesses who will be examined. In opening these proceedings I take the opportunity of publicly expressing my deep sympathy with the bereaved family—a sympathy which I am sure is felt by all who had the privilege of personal acquaintance with Lord Luxmore, and who knew his generous heart and his unfailing goodwill towards all classes of his fellow-men."

The jury nodded in grave acquiescence.

"The first witness I will call," the Coroner continued, "is the Honourable Lena Luxmore."

A constable who did duty as usher went to the door to summon the witness. As she appeared, a faint flush coloured the sallow cheeks of Michael Dred, who sat on the left of the Coroner, but away from the table.

All eyes were turned to meet the dead nobleman's elder daughter, as, with a slow and stately step, she entered the dining-room. Her beauty, unmarred as yet by a single tear, had never been more impressive. Yet, in spite of her outward calm, the wildness of her eyes, the dead pallor of her cheeks and firm-set lips, and the sad, sweet dignity of her bearing showed that

she suffered intensely. Her fine figure looked very slender in her heavy, clinging black draperies, whose sombreness made her white face seem absolutely bloodless. She advanced to the table and stood there motionless.

"Your name is Lena Alexandra Luxmore, I think?" said the Coroner, "and you are the late Lord Luxmore's eldest daughter?"

"Yes," said the girl.

"You were, I believe, the person who first discovered your father's death. Kindly tell the jury the precise circumstances under which you made that discovery."

She rested the fingers of her left hand upon the table, met for a moment the gaze of Michael Dred, and said:

"On Tuesday evening, at about half-past six, I had occasion to go into the library. On opening the door, I saw that the room was in darkness. The fire, however, was burning brightly, and I noticed that my father was not sitting in his chair, where I had expected to see him. I approached the mantelpiece, intending to ring for lights, when, on crossing the hearthrug, I was alarmed to see him lying quite still on the floor. I had nearly fallen over him." She caught her breath violently, and went on at once: "I rang the bell and knelt down by my father's side. I spoke to him, but he did not answer. I took his hand. It was cold. I then felt at his heart, and listened for his breathing, and found that he was dead."

"What did you do then?" asked the Coroner as she paused.

"I went to the door and called for help. My sister Beatrix, Mrs. Vayne, the butler, and others of the servants quickly came. I sent the butler to summon Dr. Hale. Then we applied restoratives."

"Yes," broke in the Coroner, "I have no doubt you

did all that was possible. But tell us now, when you entered the room, was anyone else present?"

"No one."

"The door was not locked?"

"No."

"Did it appear that anyone had recently been in the room—that is to say, within a short time of your own entrance?"

"As far as I could see—no."

"You say it was about half-past six when you entered. Can you state the time more exactly?"

"I am not certain to a few minutes. But it was after the half hour rather than before. It may have been twenty minutes to seven."

"Did you, before you went into the room, hear any unusual noise—any cry for help, or cries of pain, or sounds as of a body falling?"

"None."

"So far as you know, who was the last person who saw your father alive?"

The effect of this question upon the witness was strange. She started. A shadow of terror, of sudden realisation, passed over her white face. Noting her hesitation, the Coroner repeated his question. Then, with an obvious effort, she answered slowly:

"So far as I positively know—Mr Wingrove."

There was a pause. Then the Coroner proceeded:

"In what position was your father lying when you found him?"

"He was lying on his back, obliquely across the hearthrug. His right hand was partly under him. His left hand was lying at his side, clutching the hair of the rug. His head, which was towards the window, was turned away from the fire. His features were placid, but the face was discoloured. It had a livid appearance—a leaden look."

Michael Dred leaned forward suddenly.

"You say the fire was burning brightly?" he

inquired. "Was it Lord Luxmore's habit to put coals upon the fire himself?"

"It was. He disliked being disturbed by servants."

"That will do," said the Coroner. "Thank you."

Lena sank down into a chair that had been placed for her. It was no longer necessary that she should be out of the room.

Dr. Hale then gave evidence. In response to the questions put to him, he said:

"I am the usual physician of Lord Luxmore's family, and I attended the deceased intermittently during the past two years. On Tuesday evening last I was summoned to the Park by his lordship's stable-boy, who came on horseback and told me that Lord Luxmore had fallen down dead. I took the lad's horse, and was here at about a quarter past seven. On entering the library, I dismissed the young ladies. Only Mrs. Vayne and the butler remained with me. I found his lordship lying on the floor as described by the last witness. On examining him I at once saw that he was beyond my help. Nevertheless, I commenced to use every means in my power, in the faint hope of restoring him—including artificial respiration, counter irritants, hot applications, injections of ether, and cupping. As I had foreseen, none of them had the slightest effect."

There was a slight smile at the corners of Michael Dred's thin lips as the country doctor thus detailed his efforts to bring back life to the dead. He asked a question:

"How long should you say his lordship had been dead before you arrived?"

"About an hour," answered the doctor. "My first impression, gathered from the appearance of the face, was that there had been internal hæmorrhage. I also observed that the pupils of the eyes were very much contracted. This appeared to indicate the presence of a narcotic poison."

"May I ask if the contents of the stomach have been analysed?" said Michael Dred, with a glance at the Coroner by way of apology for the interposition.

"The analysis is not yet complete," replied the physician guardedly.

"Did his lordship usually enjoy good health?"

"With the exception of occasional debility, very good health indeed. He was, however, something of a *malade imaginaire*."

"In your opinion, doctor," said the Coroner, sitting more upright, "is it possible that the deceased died from natural causes?"

"No," emphatically replied the physician; "it is not possible."

A murmur ran through the assembly.

"You assert that confidently?" inquired the Coroner.

"I do," replied Dr. Hale, crimsoning with indignant excitement. "I say that, although I am still unable to determine precisely the method of the crime, I have no doubt whatever that Lord Luxmore has been murdered."

With a faint exclamation Lena Luxmore hid her white face in her hands. A new sensation was stirring in the minds of all present. The inquiry had gained a deeper solemnity. There was a moment's silence, during which every face grew keener and more grave. Michael Dred alone exhibited neither surprise nor horror.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST CLUE.

LIEUTENANT WINGROVE was the next witness called. His appearance at once created a favourable impression. His free, elastic walk, upright bearing, and candid, fearless glance suggested honour, courage, and straightforwardness in all the relations of life.

"Your name is Paul Wingrove, I believe, and you are a lieutenant in the Royal Navy?"

"Yes."

"On the day of Lord Luxmore's death did you come to Luxmore?"

"I did."

"What was the object of your visit?"

"To see Lord Luxmore's family; primarily to see his lordship himself."

"At what time did you arrive?"

"About three o'clock. On asking for Lord Luxmore, I was told, by the butler, that he was asleep. I went into the drawing-room, and waited there until I was informed that I could see him. I then went to him in the library. This was at about half-past five."

"Was Lord Luxmore alone?"

"He was."

"Did he then appear to be in good health?"

"In excellent health."

"What was the nature of your interview with him?"

Paul visibly hesitated. He glanced towards Lena, who sat with her eyes fixed on his face.

"Is it necessary that I should answer this?" he said, appealing to the Coroner. "It concerns a matter that cannot possibly have any bearing on the present inquiry."

"You must allow the jury to determine that. Kindly reply to the question."

"I went to Lord Luxmore to ask for the hand of one of his daughters. He dismissed me rather curtly. That was all."

"Was the scene between you a stormy one?"

Again Paul hesitated. Then he answered frankly, "Yes."

"Angry words passed between you?"

"Scarcely on my own side. His lordship was somewhat indignant at—at what he considered my presumption. He expressed his indignation in warm terms."

"Kindly tell us what he said."

Lieutenant Wingrove flushed deeply as he replied:

"He compared me with his nephew—whom I have not the pleasure of knowing—and called me a worthless rascal and a sneaking fortune-hunter."

These words created a painful impression in the room. Miss Luxmore's face had flushed to a vivid red.

"What were the last words exchanged between you?" pursued the Coroner unflinchingly.

This time Paul absolutely declined to answer. He was pained to observe that this refusal told against him. After a long pause the Coroner said drily:

"What time was it when you left the library?"

"I do not know. But after a short interval I heard the clock strike six."

"In what condition did you leave his lordship?"

"Standing beside his chair. He was perfectly well, so far as I could see."

"You say you heard the clock strike six after a short interval. Where were you during that interval?"

"In the drawing-room. I went there on leaving the library. I waited there for some time—I should say about ten minutes. Then I left the house. I saw no one during that time except the butler."

"Did anyone see you come out of the library?" Michael Dred asked.

"To the best of my knowledge, no one."

"While you were in the drawing-room did you hear anyone else go into the library?"

"I heard a door open. I believe it was the door of the library. I thought when I heard it that Lord Luxmore was coming out of the room. But immediately all was silent again. About five minutes later I left the house."

"Who or what were you waiting for alone there in the drawing-room?"

"I was hoping to see Miss Luxmore. But she did not come."

"When you went out did you not see any of the servants?"

"Only the butler in the front hall. There may have been others about, but I could not see. None of the lamps were lighted."

"Did you speak to the butler?"

"A few casual words passed between us. I was in a hurry to catch my train. When I got outside I saw, through the lighted window, Mrs. Vayne standing at the sideboard in this room."

Mrs. Vayne looked up sharply.

"When did you first learn of Lord Luxmore's death?"

"At Swindon station, on my journey up. I had been telegraphed for by Mr. Dred."

"One more question," said the Coroner. "Have you any knowledge of chemistry?"

Paul showed surprise at this apparently irrelevant inquiry.

"I have studied chemistry, certainly," he replied.

"I was for a time the pupil of a famous native doctor in Ceylon."

"Ah!" came from the lips of Dr. Hale.

An expression of veiled satisfaction sprang into the eyes of Michael Dred.

On Paul Wingrove's examination being concluded he was requested to leave the room, the Coroner remarking significantly that he would be required again. Then, in order to elicit proof as to the actual time of Lieutenant Wingrove's leaving Luxmore, William Stone was called. He said:

"I am station-master at Luxmore station. On the evening of Tuesday I saw the last witness standing on the up-platform, waiting for the 6.32 train for London. I knew him well by sight, and touched my hat to him. He did not speak. I opened a first-class compartment for him when the train came in. He was the only first-class passenger. There were several third-class passengers."

"Did you notice anything particular about his appearance?"

"Yes, sir. As he stood on the platform he lighted a cigar. I was standing near him at the time. He was restless and very much agitated. His face was pale—I noticed this, because when he arrived I had thought how brown and cheery he looked. He struck four matches before he got a light, which I thought was queer, seeing as he's a sailor and used to lighting his pipe in a hurricane, as you might say."

The case was growing unpleasant for Paul Wingrove. A smart juryman here propounded a question which did not seem to have occurred to anyone else.

"Was anything missing from the room or from the body of the deceased?"

The Coroner turned to Mrs. Vayne, who sat at the far end of the room, and questioned her on the point. She approached reluctantly.

"I am not aware that anything was missing," said

she. "But the room has not been disturbed. A search can be made, if necessary."

She looked across at Michael Dred as she spoke, as though assuming that it was his business to make such investigations. The detective was at this moment studying the face of Dr. Hale.

"This is a very extraordinary oversight," remarked the Coroner, in a tone of rebuke. "It is strange that with so distinguished a member of the detective force in the house, no examination should have been made."

Michael Dred turned to him with his smile of contemptuous power.

"An examination has been made," he said quietly. "The catch of one of the library windows is broken, and Lord Luxmore's watch is missing. It is believed that he wore the watch upon the day of the murder."

A murmur followed this statement. Dred went on:

"I must now request Mrs. Vayne to obtain for me all the servants' keys. It is necessary that the servants' boxes should be searched."

The Coroner turned to Mrs. Vayne, who looked flurried.

"Are all the servants in the house at the present time?" he asked.

"All," replied Mrs. Vayne shortly. "All with the exception of Edward Bell, the butler."

"And where is Bell?"

"He has gone to London on business connected with the funeral."

"Quite so—of course," remarked the Coroner. "I understand that Bell, in addition to his service as butler, also acted as his lordship's valet?"

Mrs. Vayne nodded affirmatively.

"You will please get the keys for Mr. Dred and accompany him through his search."

"I must object to this proceeding," protested Mrs. Vayne. "It is perfectly ridiculous to think of turning

over the servants' property in this way—ridiculous and uncalled for."

"If you object to accompany me, I will undertake the search alone," said Michael Dred. "All I require is that the servants' rooms should be pointed out to me."

Mrs. Vayne, seeing that her protestations were arousing suspicion, brusquely rose and preceded Michael Dred out of the room. They were absent about a quarter of an hour. On their return, Michael Dred approached the Coroner and laid a large gold watch on the table.

"Here is his lordship's watch," he said, "and you will observe that it is not going. The hands stand at exactly five minutes to six—the approximate time of the committal of the crime. Mrs. Vayne will inform you where we found it."

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERIOUS GLASS.

MRS. VAYNE looked flushed and perturbed at being thus called upon. The Coroner regarded her expectantly. The gaze of all eyes was concentrated upon her. The whole room breathlessly awaited her answer.

"We found the watch," she said slowly, "in the box of Edward Bell, the butler. He has taken his keys away with him, and the box had to be forced open."

The room was pervaded with the undefinable thrill which, on such occasions, follows an important announcement. Lena Luxmore leaned back in her chair with a deep sigh. One aching fear had been removed from her heart—the fear lest the discovery of the missing article might, in some strange way, feed rather than dissipate the suspicions that were already so strongly directed against Paul Wingrove.

"Was there anything peculiar in the manner in which the watch was placed in the box?" asked the Coroner, turning to Michael Dred.

The detective took up the watch, and opened its richly-chased gold case.

"I judge from various indications that it was hidden there before Lord Luxmore's death was discovered," he replied. "As to the circumstance of the hands having stopped at five minutes to six—well, you will probably regard this fact as a very important item of evidence. I observe," he added, proceeding with his

inspection, "that the hair-spring is broken. The watch appears to have had a knock or a fall."

"Do you suppose, then, that the mere fact of his lordship falling upon the floor would stop the works of the watch?" asked the Coroner.

"It is possible," answered Michael Dred. "These chronometers are exceedingly delicate."

He handed the watch back to the Coroner, and quietly resumed his seat. Mrs Vayne had already resumed hers.

A few minutes later the Court adjourned for lunch.

On the resumption of the inquiry, an hour afterwards, Paul Wingrove was recalled. There was a shadow on his face as he entered the room. His sea-blue eyes had darkened, as if with anxiety. He was becoming oppressed by the suspicion that hovered about him.

"In your previous evidence," began the Coroner, "you stated that when you left the drawing-room shortly after six o'clock on Tuesday evening, you saw no one but the butler. Now, where was the butler?"

"In the great hall."

"Describe his attitude. Was he walking, or standing, or sitting? Tell us exactly what he was doing."

"He was standing by the fire—crouching over the fire, I should say. I could not see what he was doing, for it was dusk, and his back was towards me; but he seemed to be burning something."

"Can you state positively that he was in the act of burning something?"

"No," was the reply; "I can only suggest that he might have been doing so. His attitude gave me that impression. When I approached him he sprang up as though he were startled."

"Did he appear to be agitated?"

"I cannot say. I paid very little attention to him. Indeed, I was uncertain at first who he was. I said to him, 'Is that you, Bell?' and he replied, 'Yes, sir.'

He told me he was about to take a light into the library. He said he would have taken one in before, only—"

Paul stopped, glancing across the room at Lena Luxmore. His face had flushed slightly.

"Only what?" asked the Coroner, somewhat sharply. "Repeat his exact words, please."

"As far as I remember," continued Paul, apparently with an effort, "he said, 'I'd have taken lights in earlier, only that his lordship seemed to be upset at something. His lordship does get ruffled like that sometimes.'"

"Anything more?" inquired the Coroner, conscious of a certain abruptness in the pause. "You must tell the whole truth, please."

Paul, ignorant of the incident of the watch, could not see whither all this was tending. He answered patiently, however:

"He only remarked, speaking of Lord Luxmore, 'But he seems quiet enough now, sir—*very quiet*—doesn't he?' That was all."

There was a perceptible stir throughout the assembly. Mrs Vayne was heard to ejaculate, "Ah!" Michael Dred shifted his position, and rested his chin on his hand.

"When you left the library and went to the drawing-room, did you see any sign of Bell, or hear anyone moving about in the halls?"

Paul shook his head.

"I saw no one and heard nothing. While I was in the drawing-room I thought I heard a movement in the conservatory, and, as I have already said, I heard the library door open."

"Can you state positively whether that door was opened from within or from without?"

"I cannot say. I heard no footsteps. I repeat that I thought it was Lord Luxmore coming out to see if I had gone."

The clear, authoritative voice of Michael Dred broke the momentary silence.

"While you were in the library, did you observe the condition of the fire? Was it burning brightly, or did it need fresh fuel?"

Paul, apparently surprised at the question, deliberated. Lena Luxmore bent forward anxiously, breathless with suspense. At the time of the discovery of her father's body the library fire had been piled high and burning brightly. If Paul should reply that at the time of his own presence in the room it had been low in the grate, then his answer would prove that Lord Luxmore was still living at the moment of his departure, and that either the old lord himself, or else his unknown murderer, had subsequently put coals on.

"I cannot remember," replied Paul at last.

Lena sank back with a sigh.

"That is a pity," drily returned Michael Dred. "A great deal might depend on the answer to this question."

Raising his eyes towards Paul with no consciousness of their private friendship in his keen glance, he continued:

"I understand that when you entered the library Lord Luxmore was sitting in the easy-chair near the fire. There is a small table next to the easy-chair. Was there anything on that table?"

"Yes; a photograph, a cigar-box, and some books."

"Nothing else?"

"There was a wine-glass—"

"Ah!" interrupted the detective. "An empty wine-glass?"

"No. It contained a golden-brown liquid that looked like sherry. I should have said that it was certainly sherry but that I know Lord Luxmore was a tectotaler. It was probably a cordial. I remember,

when I was standing near his lordship, I noticed the refraction of the light through the liquid."

"H'm!" came from Dr. Hale, who was moving restlessly in his seat.

Michael Dred glanced round sharply, but immediately went on with his questioning:

"Did Lord Luxmore drink any of that liquid while you were present?"

"No. Once he lifted the glass to his lips, but at that moment something that I said disturbed him, and he put it down without drinking. It was then that he rose."

"When he rose, what did he do?"

"Stood upon the hearthrug facing the fire."

"With his back towards you?"

"For a few moments, yes."

"Where were you standing at that time?"

"Near the small table. My eye had been attracted by the photograph that was upon it. It was a photograph of one of Lord Luxmore's daughters."

"Ah!" said Michael Dred again, significantly. A dull red had crept up over his sallow skin. Suddenly changing the subject, he asked:

"I think you have already said that it was in Ceylon that you studied chemistry?"

"Yes; in Colombo."

"Was that wine-glass found empty after his lordship's death?" asked the Coroner of Michael Dred. "And has it been carefully examined?"

For once a baffled expression had come on the great detective's clever face.

"This point of evidence is entirely new to me," he said slowly. "I have neither heard nor seen anything of the wine-glass in question. Perhaps you will recall Miss Luxmore."

The Coroner did so. Paul Wingrove sat down, and Lena rose and moved to the end of the table, where she stood erect and impassive as before.

"There was no glass upon the side-table, nor anywhere else in the room," she said positively, in reply to the Coroner's question. "I know, because directly lights were brought I looked to see if there was anything with which I could moisten my father's lips. I was surprised at not finding the glass, because my father has lately been in the habit of taking a little cordial after his afternoon sleep. Where the glass had stood I noticed a circle of liquid on the table."

"Whose duty was it to take that glass of cordial into the library?"

"It was Bell's duty," she replied.

"Then," said the Coroner, with deliberation, "that glass, whether empty or full, must have been removed between the time of Mr. Wingrove's entrance into the library and your own entrance?"

"It must have been so," Lena Luxmore assented faintly. And again that blanching terror, that shadow of realisation, came upon her face. She lifted her eyes towards Michael Dred, and saw his heavy lids and brownish-black head bent down over a sheet of paper, on which he was rapidly writing. Some unaccountable impulse prompted her, on being released by the Coroner, to go over to the detective and question him with the privilege of long friendship.

"What is that? What are you writing?" she whispered nervously, pointing to the sheet of paper.

He smiled at her, calmly folded up the paper, and gave it to one of his subordinates with instructions that it should be sent off at once.

"You will know later on," he answered her.

She was dissatisfied. There seemed something ominous in his reply.

"Before I adjourn the inquiry," the Coroner was saying, "I must ask you, Mr. Dred, if we have any guarantee of the return here of Edward Bell. It is imperatively necessary that he should be present to-morrow morning. His inexplicable possession of

Lord Luxmore's watch makes it likely that he intends to disappear."

"There is nothing to fear," said Michael Dred calmly. "I have been kept informed of his every movement from the moment he left this house. He will return here at six o'clock this evening."

The Coroner nodded satisfaction, and beckoned Dr. Hale.

"May we count upon having complete medical testimony to-morrow morning?" he asked.

"I think I may promise that," said the doctor. "Two eminent practitioners are expected to arrive from London to-day, and the examination will be at once proceeded with."

When, at six that evening, Edward Bell returned from his sad mission to London in connection with the arrangements for his late master's funeral, he found himself arrested, and kept in custody in one of the upper rooms. The charge against him was that of having stolen Baron Luxmore's watch. No further charge would be preferred at present, this one of theft serving the police as a sufficient excuse for his safe detention pending the result of the inquest.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOVE'S PERFECT TRUST.

PAUL WINGROVE left the stricken house and rushed out into the grounds in the gloom of the falling night. He was a changed man from the buoyant young sailor who had that morning advanced to give evidence with an eye so fearless and bright and a bearing so proudly confident. This day that was dying had brought him an anguish whose bitterness no lapse of time could ever wholly remove. He—he who through all his life had striven to walk in the ways of honour and right-doing—was suspected of the blackest and most dastardly of human crimes.

Even yet he scarcely realised it. To be suspected of the murder of an old man—an old man, too, who had known him from his boyhood, and who was the father of the woman to whom he had given his heart! Oh, it was monstrous, horrible!

He saw now why it was that they had all greeted him so strangely on his return from Plymouth. Their suspicion had rested upon him even then—perhaps even from the very moment of the discovery of the dead peer's body.

He shuddered at the thought. His whole soul rose against them in bitterest reproach. Did his unstained past count for nothing in their eyes? After so many years of friendship, could they know him so little as to believe it possible that he could be guilty of this thing? And Lena, his worshipped Lena, did she, too, think, even for a moment, that—

He dared not any more connect himself even in thought with the dreadful crime.

"Oh, no, no, no!" he cried aloud to the empty night, clasping his head desperately between his strong young hands. "It is not possible."

His own voice startled him. He glanced around, searching the shadows with his keen, sea-trained eye. The moon was rising full and golden, flooding the open lawns with light, and plunging the dark groves into yet deeper blackness. Paul saw no one. And yet, not far behind him, two stealthy figures, keeping in darkness, moved with his movements, never losing him from sight. The night air seemed heavy with mystery and with the hovering horror of an unavenged crime.

Paul walked back towards the house. It was the time for him to return to the Luxmore Arms, but first he wanted to see the beautiful face of her he loved, and to read on it whether or not she still had faith in him. One glance would be enough. He could not sleep in peace unless he saw her.

As he approached the western side of the mansion he saw a tall, slender, black figure standing on a narrow terrace outside the morning-room. By the beating of his heart he knew that it was Lena Luxmore. She bent towards him as he drew near.

"I have been looking for you, Paul," she said.

Oh, the sweetness of that low, well-modulated voice! And her white, tragic beauty looked sublime there in the ghostly moonlight against the shadow of the massive pile behind her.

"Lena!" he appealed to her, in a passionate tone of pain. "Lena, I implore you, by the holiness of our love, tell me that you do not doubt me—that you do not think that it was I who—oh, Heaven, how shall I say it?"

"Hush!" she interrupted, lifting her hand. "You would wrong me if you said it. I know your heart as

I know my own. Listen, Paul! My faith in you is so great that if you had been found beside the—the body—with the poison-cup in your hand, I should *know* that you had not done it. No circumstances could be so dark against you as to make me doubt you."

"Thank God!" he exclaimed. In the silvery moon radiance his uplifted face shone with his heart's relief. From where he stood on the grass level he stretched his arms up to her, but suddenly drew them back again.

"No, no! I cannot! I dare not!" he cried, with a bitter regret that hurt her like physical pain. "*He* forbade it."

Paul Wingrove had recoiled as though a phantom drove him back. Even the echo of his own voice returned to him with a tone of affright, as though it were the voice of another. The rustling of the dying leaves seemed like warning whispers.

"Paul!" came the voice of Lena, imperious now and full. "Paul!"

He drew near to the terrace parapet. Lord Luxmore's orphaned daughter leaned over it, holding out her hands. She had moved, and now stood outlined with startling distinctness between the cold, wan moonbeams and a flood of mellow light that streamed out from the room within through the open glass doors.

"Paul," she whispered, while her breath came short and fast, "give me your hands. I love you. I—even now in my deep grief—release you solemnly from my father's commands. I am not afraid to do so." She raised her head and glanced around her. "If my father's spirit is near us here and can see into your heart, he must sanction my faithfulness to you. Now, in his greater wisdom, he has learned your true worth. He will bless us, Paul—"

Her voice trembled. Paul bowed his head against the cold stone of the parapet.

"When will this cloud pass?" he murmured. "When shall we see light again?"

"Soon — soon," she answered confidently, laying her hand softly upon his hair. "God watches through it all. And now—good-night!"

"Good-night!" he responded fervently, reverently. "Good-night, my dearest."

She turned and went back through the French-windows into the brightly-lighted morning-room. As she did so, a limping figure emerged from the shadows and walked along the terrace, following her. It passed also into the morning-room, where she had sunk down upon a couch. At sight of the intruder she started up.

"Mr. Dred!"

"I overheard you," said the detective, in a strained voice. "Are you not afraid, Lena Luxmore? By Heaven, are you not afraid?"

CHAPTER IX.

EDWARD BELL.

THE proceedings opened on the following morning with the examination of two or three witnesses as to whether Lord Luxmore was wearing his watch on the day of his death. The general belief was that he had worn it. Some unimportant questions were also asked by Mr. Roscoe, the family lawyer, who was present for the first time.

Mrs Vayne was then called. Her examination aroused comparatively little interest. She began by corroborating Miss Luxmore's evidence as to the position in which the deceased was lying when discovered.

"When you entered the library, Mrs. Vayne did you notice whether the wine-glass already mentioned was still on the small table beside the easy-chair?"

"No, I did not notice."

"Mr. Wingrove has stated that when he left the house, at about six o'clock, he saw you standing at the side-board in this room. Had you been here long?"

"No. I had at that moment come downstairs."

"And you passed no one on your way?"

"No one."

"From the dining-room could you hear Mr. Wingrove talking with Bell?"

"No. The door was shut. I believed Mr. Wingrove to be still in the library with his lordship, and was most astonished when I heard that he had suddenly gone away. He had arranged to stay to

dinner. I only heard of his departure a moment before I was summoned to the library by the violent ringing of the bell."

"Call Beatrix Mary Luxmore!"

A faint murmur of sympathy ran through the room as Beatrix entered. Her appearance now belied the reputation that she had of being a headstrong, mischievous, and rather fast young lady. Unlike her sister, she was weeping bitterly; her fair, flower-like face was almost spoiled by grief. The dainty smallness and lightness of her figure looked utterly unsuited to her funereal garments.

After a few preliminary questions, the Coroner asked:

"Where were you at six o'clock on the evening of Tuesday last?"

"In the conservatory. I had come downstairs at about a quarter to six, and passed through the drawing-room to the conservatory. I was there cutting flowers for the dinner-table. I stayed there until I heard the clock strike six, and then I crossed the drawing-room again and went into the inner drawing-room."

"Did you, on either occasion of your passing through the drawing-room, see Mr Wingrove there?"

"No. On both occasions the drawing-room was empty. I saw no one from the time I entered the conservatory to when I heard my sister's voice calling from the library for help."

"No one during three-quarters of an hour?" insisted the Coroner incredulously.

Beatrix Luxmore's tear-dimmed eyes cast a rapid, nervous glance around the room.

"No one," she repeated faintly. Her voice was so low as to be almost inaudible.

Michael Dred bent upon her a keener glance than any other witness had yet undergone from his compelling eyes. Was this childlike creature telling the

truth? Experience had taught him to mistrust ostentatious grief.

The Coroner turned to another point.

"When you went into the library at your sister's call did you remove a wine-glass from the little table near the fire?"

"No," was the immediate reply. "I saw no wine-glass." And—caused probably by the renewed recollection of that awful scene in the library—a fresh access of weeping seized her. She took a seat at her sister's side, and there wept silently, with her face hidden between her hands.

A whisper passed from lip to lip, "Edward Bell." Before the whisper had died away the butler appeared, ushered in by a constable.

Edward Bell was an elderly man, probably older than he looked, with small, twinkling eyes, a complexion like a ripe apple, and formal, close-cut side-whiskers. His aspect now was that of a man midway between abject grief and resentful indignation. He was not in livery, but wore the clothes in which he had last evening returned from London.

"Your name, please," began the Coroner.

"Edward 'Enery Bell," responded the butler, in an aggrieved tone, "and you all know it as well as I do myself. Edward 'Enery Bell, fifty years of age, and thirty of them years in his late lordship's service, as valet to 'is lordship's self, and butler to the 'ousehold. I've dressed 'is lordship w'en he was a haler, 'eartier man than he've been lately. I've travelled with him from Italy to the 'Oly Land, and kept 'im that elegant in the wilds of the Halps as you wouldn't have known he was away from Piccadilly. He was the kindest master that any man ever 'ad, and my best friend; and now it isn't enough that I've lost him, but I must be suspected of bringing about his end—dogged about in London, and then w'en I come home appre'ended and insulted by a lot of strangers, and kept out of my

own room. And after all these years of faithful service—"

"That will do," interposed the Coroner. "You need not volunteer information. It is only necessary that you should answer the questions put to you. I must warn you, however, that anything you may say incriminating yourself will appear again in evidence should this case be brought to trial. Now, where were you between half-past five and six o'clock on the evening of Lord Luxmore's death?"

"I was in my pantry until about ten minutes to six. Then I went with a taper to light the lamps in the library. But when I got to the library door I 'eard my lord's voice very loud and hangry, and I thought I'd better not interrupt him just then, so I left the taper in the great hall, and went away again. At six o'clock I came back—"

"Wait," said the Coroner. "Why did you not light the lamps in the other rooms and the hall?"

"Because Miss Beatrix told me not to. She came to the drawing-room and said, 'Don't light up yet, Bell. It is such a fine evening.' She was halways fond of twilight, was Miss Beatrix—a bit romantic like, if I may say so."

"You are sure you saw Miss Beatrix?" said the Coroner gravely.

"Sure, sir? I'm positive!" emphatically affirmed the butler. "I 'ope you don't doubt my word, sir?"

For one instant Beatrix Luxmore lifted her face and darted a fleeting glance of spite at the old servitor. Neither the glance nor the sudden crimson of her cheeks passed unobserved. Michael Dred took up the chain of questions.

"When you came back at six o'clock of course you went straight into the library?" he asked casually.

"No, Mr. Dred. No, sir, that I did not," wrathfully returned Bell. "I went to get my taper, which I'd left in the front hall, and was lighting it at the fire

when Mr. Wingrove came in sudden, very hurried, and buttoning his overcoat—"

"One moment," Michael Dred lifted his hand. "Was Mr. Wingrove coming from the direction of the library?"

"I believe so, sir. He seemed to be coming that way."

Paul made a movement as if to interrupt, but the butler went on, not heeding him.

"He was very flurried, which was only to be hexpected after the 'igh words him and his lordship had been 'aving. He said to me, 'Is that you, Bell?' he said. I said, 'Yes, sir; I didn't know you was going away so soon,' I said. 'I thought you was going to stop to dinner.' But he 'ardly stopped to listen. He was gone before I could say anything more."

"He was agitated, you say?"

"He was indeed, sir, very much hagitated."

Miss Luxmore's face was growing rigid with anxiety.

A certain subdued triumph was in Michael Dred's eyes as he continued:

"And, of course, when Mr. Wingrove was gone, you went direct to the library?"

"No, sir," denied the butler. "Because Mr. Wingrove said his lordship had better not be disturbed. I didn't see his lordship again until after his death."

A faint exclamation escaped from Lena's colourless lips. There was a painful silence in the room. It was broken by the voice of the Coroner, now grown stern.

"Then how do you account for the fact that his lordship's watch has been found in your possession?"

The butler showed surprise and indignation.

"Then somebody must have broken hopen my box," he cried, in an injured tone, "for I took the key of it away with me. As for the watch, why, his

lordship handed it to me 'imself on Tuesday forenoon, telling me he'd broken the main-spring, and I must take it up to London to be mended."

A blank expression came on the faces of the jury. Michael Dred smiled incredulously.

CHAPTER X.

A SIGNIFICANT TRIFLE.

THE butler caught sight of the detective's look of doubt and became incoherently resentful. He began to chatter excitedly in self-defence until the Coroner stopped him sharply with a question.

"At what time in the forenoon did Lord Luxmore hand you the watch?"

"At about a quarter to twelve," answered Bell, in a downcast tone. "He was in his dressing-room, getting ready for his morning drive. He said to me, 'Bell,' he said, 'don't forget I want you to go up to town to-morrow to take that little parcel to Lady Ormidale. You must be at her house before eleven o'clock. You'd better drive straight there from the station and give the parcel into 'er ladyship's own 'and.' Then he took out his watch to look at the time, forgetting that the watch wasn't going. 'Ah, by the way,' he said, 'there's my watch, too, to be mended. Here,' he said, 'you'd better take charge of it now, so that you won't forget it,' he said, giving me the watch. Then, as I was taking it away, he called me back, telling me to wait till he wrote a note to the watchmaker with hin-structions. When he wrote the note I put it into my pocket and took the watch to my own room, and locked it up in my box for safety. There, sir," concluded the butler, with defiant satisfaction, "that's 'ow I came to be in possession of his lordship's watch."

Michael Dred sat silent, with folded arms, giving now no sign either of belief or disbelief. To judge by

the fixed look in his eyes, some single point in Bell's speech appeared to have struck him.

At the mention of Lady Ormidale, both Lena and Beatrix Luxmore had glanced up with looks of wondering surprise. Why had their father been so attentive to this lady, who was a young widow, wealthy and beautiful? Mrs. Vayne's face was dark with vexation.

"From what you say," observed the Coroner, whom Bell's statement had somewhat nonplussed, "I am to understand that you had already—before the event of Lord Luxmore's death—arranged to go up to London on Wednesday morning?"

"Yes, sir, I was going, as I say, to Lady Ormidale's, and also to his lordship's tailor's, to order some special new clothes for him. The parcel for the lady was a very particular herrand, as I 'appen to know. I dooly called on her ladyship when I went up about the funeral arrangements, and broke to 'er the news of his lordship's sad death. Her ladyship took on awful. Of course there wasn't now any 'urry for his lordship's watch, and I left it where it was, never thinking that my box would be dessecrated, if I may say so, by the 'ands of a lot of hinterfering detectives. Has for the note for his lordship's watchmaker, if any gentlemen likes to go upstairs now and look in the tail-pocket of the old dress-coat which I've been in the 'abit of wearing of a morning, there he will find the letter jest as I left it."

A man was despatched on this errand, and the Coroner continued:

"You say that the mainspring of the watch was broken by Lord Luxmore himself. Can you tell us at what hour of the day or night this accident happened?"

"I don't know," doggedly answered the harassed butler. "His lordship broke the spring in winding up the watch. He'd forgotten to wind it over night,

he said, he had been that perturbed by the doings of his nephew, Mr. Reginald, so he wound it up in the morning."

"At what time did the hands stand when, as you say, you received the watch from your master?"

"Lor, sir, I never looked. It's a 'unter watch, and I never hopened it. And as to that, I don't see what it matters. The watch 'adn't anything whatever to do with his lordship's death."

"Please reserve your opinions," said the Coroner reprovingly. "And now, pay attention. It has, I believe, been Lord Luxmore's custom to take a glass of some cordial after his afternoon sleep?"

"Yes, sir, it has. I took it in to him regular."

"Did you take it in as usual on the afternoon of Tuesday last?"

"I did, sir—a glass of orange wine at tea-time."

"Where did you get the orange wine from?"

"From a bottle kept in the cellarette there," answered the butler, pointing to a great oaken sideboard at the end of the room.

By the Coroner's direction the bottle mentioned was produced, identified by Bell, and put aside for its contents to be analysed.

"Did you fill the glass yourself?" was the next question.

"I did, sir; I filled it myself, and took it in myself. His lordship not being awake yet, I put it as usual on the small table by the side of his chair."

"Was the glass clean before you filled it?" interposed Michael Dred.

"Quite clean," replied Bell indignantly. "I wiped it round myself, with a napkin."

"Kindly go to the sideboard and point out which of those glasses it resembled."

Bell obeyed, and to his astonishment found specimens of every kind of wine-glass in the house laid out for his inspection. He immediately selected one—a

very delicate one of cut glass, with an extremely fragile stem—and handed it to the Coroner.

"That's one of the same two dozen," he said briefly.

"When you went into the library at the time of the discovery of Lord Luxmore's death, you of course removed the empty wine-glass from the table?" queried Dred.

"No, sir. No, I did not. I looked for it, but it was not there."

"It is still missing from the two dozen," volunteered Mrs. Vayne significantly.

"It is most extraordinary that no trace can be found of that wine-glass!" remarked the Coroner.

"Wait a moment," said Michael Dred. "Will you please call Mary Sullivan?"

Several persons looked up in surprise. A moment later the woman Mary Sullivan, who was one of the under housemaids, entered the room. Michael Dred addressed her.

"On Wednesday morning last, when you were sweeping the corridor near the library, you found something on the floor. What was it?"

"Sure, yer honour, 'twas meself that towld you 'twas a paice of glass. I was swapin' the lobby carpet, near where the gintlemen hangs their coats, and I saw somethin' shinin'. 'Twas a bit of broken glass, sor."

"Do you recognise this as the same piece?" asked Michael Dred, approaching her with a small paper packet, which he had taken from his waistcoat pocket and was carefully unfolding.

Mary Sullivan threw up her hands as she looked at the contents of the packet.

"Och, sure that's the very same!" she exclaimed. "Yer honour must have been rakin' over the dust heap—"

"You can swear it is the same?" persisted the detective.

"Ay, faith and I can."

Michael Dred turned back towards the Coroner.

"If you will compare this piece of glass with the stem of the wine-glass before you, I think you will find them exactly similar," he said. "And at the same time you will find them quite unlike any of the other kinds of glasses. Notice the cutting of the stem."

Bell, very excited, shuffled forward, but the Coroner waved him back.

"It is evident, then," said the Coroner gravely, "that the missing wine-glass has been broken. The other fragments must be searched for."

Mary Sullivan then retired, and the examination of the butler was continued.

"What time was it when you took the cordial into the library?" asked the Coroner.

"Five o'clock, sir. The clock had just struck."

"Now, listen to me attentively. Did you or did you not go again into the library between the time of your taking in the wine and the time of your being summoned there by Miss Luxmore?"

"I did not."

The butler was told to stand aside, and Mrs. Vayne was called. Mrs. Vayne's manner was suave, but slightly more nervous than it had been on the occasion of her previous examination. In answer to the questions addressed to her, she said:

"I last saw Lord Luxmore alive about twenty minutes past five on Tuesday afternoon. At that time, knowing that Mr. Wingrove was waiting to see his lordship, I knocked gently at the library door. The answer told me that Lord Luxmore was awake. I then opened the door, and, holding it ajar, looked into the room, and informed him that Mr. Wingrove was in the drawing-room, and wished to see him. He said in an annoyed tone, 'What on earth does he want to see me for? Tell him to come in.' I then went to the

drawing-room to announce to Mr. Wingrove that his lordship was waiting to receive him."

"Now, think well, Mrs. Vayne. Did you, while you were standing at the door, notice a wine-glass upon the little table?"

"Lord Luxmore had the glass in his hand all the time I stood there. He was sipping from it."

"That will do. Thank you."

CHAPTER XI.

THE POISON.

A DEEP hush prevailed in the spacious dining-room. By the Coroner's orders the room had been cleared of all but the jury, the reporters, Michael Dred, and the lawyer of the Luxmore family, Mr. Roscoe. Beside the oaken table stood a tall, remarkable-looking man, with a worn, earnest face. This was the celebrated physician, Dr. Mortimer. Near him sat his colleague, Dr. Wilkes, an equally eminent surgeon. Dr. Hale had not yet arrived.

The pale October sunlight was shining in through the long windows on that sombre assembly. Dr. Mortimer was speaking in a quiet, level voice, that seemed to intensify, rather than break, the expectant stillness.

"I arrived here yesterday afternoon," he said, "and, in conjunction with my colleague, have been occupied ever since in making a *post-mortem* examination of the late Lord Luxmore's body. In the course of an interview with Mr. Hale, the family physican, I gathered particulars as to the appearance of the body immediately subsequent to death. From indications pointed out by him, I concurred in his opinion that death had been caused by poison. As a result of my own investigations, I have now no doubt whatever that this was so.

"Mr. Hale informed me that he had not been able to determine the exact nature of the poison. His belief was that it was narcotic; but in this I differed

from him. I have now completed a thorough analysis of the contents of the stomach, employing for that purpose Reinsch's well-known process; and in the course of that analysis have demonstrated, beyond a doubt, the presence of arsenious acid."

At this announcement Michael Dred lapsed into an unusual manifestation of feeling. His ordinarily emotionless face expressed a baffled consternation. He gazed at the physician, as though doubting either his skill or his sanity. Dr. Mortimer continued, with the confidence of absolute certainty:

"I obtained, in all, from the digestive organs a little under three grains of arsenic."

"H'm!" said Michael Dred. His tone was not one of horror, but of a curious and apparently overwhelming astonishment. He bent forward as if to listen yet more intently.

"Is that quantity sufficient to have caused death?" inquired the Coroner gravely.

"Indubitably," was the emphatic reply. "Under ordinary circumstances, two grains of arsenic would prove fatal to a healthy man."

A deep murmur arose from the jury. Michael Dred's lips moved, but no words came from them. After a pause, the Coroner said:

"I presume that you made a general examination of the body and of the vital organs?"

"We did," replied Dr. Mortimer, turning to his colleague, who rose and said:

"The result of that examination is somewhat indefinite and perplexing. The heart was slightly diseased, but not sufficiently so to prevent his lordship from attaining a very advanced age. The brain was perfectly sound, the liver and kidneys were in good condition, and the lungs, with the exception of the left lung, were healthy. The left lung, however, presents an appearance that is most unusual and not a little disquieting. The lung is not in any way organically

diseased ; and yet its outer membrane appeared to be abraded. There was also—which is inexplicable—some recent hæmorrhage, and a portion of the lung was inflamed, as though by the presence of irritant foreign matter. It is utterly impossible that the foreign matter could have been introduced into the lung by inhalation, and equally impossible that it could have been introduced through the skin, as there was no perceptible incision. There was, however, something peculiar in the appearance of the outer skin of the chest—a slight blue swelling or discoloration, which is not, in my opinion, wholly due to mortification. The affected portion of the lung has been preserved, and will be submitted to examination under the microscope."

"Mere theories!" exclaimed Michael Dred impatiently. "What is the use of inquiring minutely into local disease when the actual cause of death has already been declared?"

"Very little use, in all probability," returned the great surgeon. "I have merely mentioned this abnormal condition of the lung from a sense of duty. It is an artificial condition such as I have never hitherto encountered."

"You speak of a discoloration on the outer skin," observed the Coroner. "Will you please describe that more minutely?"

"There is a slight bluish swelling," explained the doctor, "having its centre over the inter-costal space between the fourth and fifth ribs, about three inches from the sternum, or breast-bone. Up to the present we are uncertain whether that discoloration is the result of exudation from within or an external blow. The latter appears the more probable."

"Pardon me," interrupted Michael Dred, "I gather from your description that this bruise of which you speak would be situated exactly under the watch-pocket?"

"Exactly," said Dr. Wilkes.

Michael Dred turned to the Coroner.

"You see," he said, with quiet triumph, "that same blow could have stopped the watch."

"Dear me! dear me!" sighed the family lawyer, shaking his head.

"It is very remarkable that Dr. Hale should have said nothing of this," commented the Coroner querulously. "He could not fail to have observed the bruise. Is he in the house at present?"

"No," said Michael Dred. "He has not yet arrived."

At this juncture, the man who had been sent to search in the butler's pocket for the letter to the watchmaker, returned.

"I have searched, not only the dress-coat pocket, but also the butler's box, and, in fact, the whole room," he announced, "but I cannot find any trace of the letter referred to. In the fireplace, however, I found these portions of a torn envelope."

The fragments of paper having been handed to the Coroner, Michael Dred pieced them together.

"The address on this envelope is certainly that of a Bond Street watchmaker," he observed, "but it is not written in Lord Luxmore's handwriting. Edward Bell has, therefore, failed to vindicate himself."

"He had better be recalled," said the Coroner. "We will hear him immediately after lunch."

CHAPTER XII.

"ALWAYS AND ALWAYS."

MEANWHILE, throughout the rest of the house, the spell of horror deepened. The body of the murdered peer had been removed from the library, and now lay in the principal bed-chamber awaiting the funeral, which was to take place on the following day.

Still, as in the first hours of death's presence there, scarcely a sound broke the awe-stricken silence. No voice rose higher than a deep whisper; footfalls were muffled; doors were opened and shut noiselessly, as if spies turned the handles. And spies indeed they were, for in that mystery-shadowed house everyone suspected the others. No one could trust the other's heart. The shuddering whisper, "Arsenic!" was in the air, and each one shrank from the other's touch. All were conscious of a vague evil being at work about them. Confusion and dread reigned in the great, dim rooms, and suspicion lurked darkly in the silent corridors.

The orphaned sisters, Lena and Beatrix, rarely spoke to each other. A darker cloud than that of the tragedy itself seemed to have fallen upon Beatrix. Pale as a ghost, and restless as a lost soul, she wandered about the house, at one time sullen and speechless, at another bursting into violent paroxysms of uncontrollable grief. At the least unaccustomed sound or movement she would start and glance round with terror in her eyes. Her sleep—usually the heavy, dreamless sleep of healthy youth—was now disturbed. On this last night her wild dream-cries had aroused both

her sister and Mrs Vayne, who slept in rooms on either side of her. They found her pale and haggard, with dilated eyes staring into vacancy. In answer to their questions, she broke into a passion of sobs.

During the hour in which the court was cleared for the examination of the medical men, Lena Luxmore sought her sister in the drawing-room.

"Beatrix," she said gravely, "I want you to give me an answer about something which distresses me. Were you, or were you not, alone between a quarter to six and half-past six on—on *that evening?*"

"I was alone," passionately answered Beatrix, lifting her fair face defiantly. "Who could have been with me?"

"You said you saw no one during all that time," continued the elder sister, in a perplexed tone. "You said it on your oath, Beatrix. And yet Bell has declared twice, on his oath, that you went to the drawing-room door and told him not to light the lamps."

A tremor passed through Beatrix's slight frame. She clenched her small hands as if with the emotion of some inward conflict.

"He told a lie!" she muttered indistinctly. "He has perjured himself all through. I believe it is he who murdered our father."

Michael Dred was not present to watch her at this moment. Had she forgotten the eternal presence of God?

The harsh vindictiveness of her low muttering had struck horribly on Lena's ear. She turned away.

"Surely Beatrix would not tell a lie!" she murmured to herself, "at least not now, with our father lying dead in the house."

Suddenly she felt a hand upon her arm. Beatrix was by her side.

"What do you think father meant by sending Bell to Lady Ormidale's?" the younger girl panted, darting

the keen glance of her dimmed brown eyes into the blue-gray depths of her sister's. "I will tell you. He meant to marry Lady Ormidale. He was going to do it because he hated Reginald—"

"Reginald is not a good man," interrupted Lena gravely. "Father's judgment of him was just and true."

"He passed the same judgment on Paul Wingrove," retorted Beatrix bitterly. "Was that also just and true?"

Crimsoning to the temples, Lena freed herself from the detaining touch and hurried away. The mocking tone of her sister's last words had stung her sharply. It seemed that no one but herself had faith in the man to whom she had not feared to pledge her own pure heart for all eternity.

She went towards the morning-room, hoping to find Paul there. She wanted to see him before the adjournment of the inquest should release Michael Dred from the dining-room. Of late the continual haunting presence of the great detective had oppressed her almost beyond endurance. He seemed to hold a sword suspended above her head. Go whither she would he was in her path, chilling her blood with the severity of his gaze, warning her back from Paul.

Mrs. Vayne, handsome in her black robes, passed her with an outburst of reproach:

"You are going to Lieutenant Wingrove? Unnatural daughter! How can you find courage to speak to him, to take his hand—the hand that, for all we know, dropped the poison in the glass!"

Lena glided on, not answering, although the words had cut her to the heart. A moment later she was clasped in Paul's arms, gathering strength from his strength, and hope from the world of love shining in his handsome, manly face.

"Lena! Lena! Are you giving way? We must be brave, my darling."

"It is easy to be brave for my own sake, Paul. It is for you that I feel afraid at times." Her eyes glanced swiftly about the room. She started and trembled. "Paul, you have seen the newspapers?"

He smiled sadly, but his eyes flashed.

"They are full of veiled suggestions against me. But what does it matter, my dearest? You and I know that I am innocent. And the cloud is lifting a little, too. Suspicion is strengthening against Bell. There is one thing, dearest, of which we may be well assured—that the person who took that wine-glass from the library must be the murderer."

"Whom do you suspect?" she whispered, lifting her delicate, colourless face to his.

"I suspect no one," he answered, in a voice as low as hers. "It is all confusion to me. I am groping in the dark."

She drew his head down closer to her own.

"Listen, Paul. I have found out where Michael Dred sent that telegram. It was to someone on board the *Berenice*."

Paul Wingrove started as if he had been shot. Reddening from throat to brow, he walked the length of the room and back. Then he stopped before her, caught her hands, and clasped them passionately to his heart.

"Lena," he murmured ,in a changed voice, "if this slander and suspicion should ruin my career, would you still be true to me?"

"Always and always," she answered solemnly.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN AUDACIOUS SUGGESTION.

On the resumption of the inquiry after lunch the butler shuffled back, with the same aggrieved expression as before on his ripe-apple face.

"The letter you spoke of has not been found," announced the Coroner severely.

"Not been found!" echoed Bell, in apparent astonishment. "You let me go and look for it, sir. I'll find it."

"It is quite useless," rejoined the Coroner. "A most thorough search has been made of your room, and nothing has been discovered except pieces of a torn envelope, which were found in the grate. The envelope has the watchmaker's address upon it."

"Why, that's the henvelope that the letter was in!" cried the old man, in wrathful mystification. "I wrote the address upon it myself, so as not to forget it, because my memory isn't so good as it was in the days when I travelled with his lordship, and had to remember the names of furriners, and the letter's been took out of it. I tell you what it is, sir, there's somebody plotting against me — plotting to ruin me. There's a deal of plotting going on in this 'ouse—has been for a long time past."

"You may stand aside," said the Coroner, in a tone of command.

But the butler would not be commanded. His feelings had reached a pitch of exasperation that made him deaf to all authority.

"No, sir, no, sir," he protested vehemently, stubbornly standing his ground. "I won't be 'ushed up, sir. When a man's badgered and ill-treated as I've been these past two days, and suspected of murdering a master as he would 'ave liked to live till ninety, he's got a right to be listened to. You're right enough to make this inquiry into his lordship's death; for it isn't natural that a man should die out of his bed, and if his lordship did die by foul play—which I don't doubt—why, I've got my own opinion on the subject. I never did like that doctor, and ever since Lord Luxmore first declared his hintention of making Mr. Reginald a doctor and bringing him down to Luxmore to practise, I've known—more by looks than by words—that there 'asn't been the best of feeling between Dr. Hale and his lordship. And natural enough, say I. For why? Because, don't you see, if Mr. Reginald Luxmore was to 'ave become a doctor down in these parts, well, Dr. Hale's practice would not be worth much then, would it?"

The Coroner made an imperious sign to stop the flow of the butler's garrulity. But the shrill, quivering voice only gabbled louder than before.

"And when I come to think of it, I remember that his lordship often complained of feeling very bad after taking that med'sin he's been having so long. Yes, and Mrs. Vayne could tell you the same if she was only asked. Because her and me have often talked about it, and she have said that in her opinion this med'sin did his lordship far more harm than good—which, if I may say so, is exactly my own hopinion. In fact, sir, so little did I believe in the med'sin that, without saying anything to Mrs. Vayne or the young ladies, I have more than once chucked the stuff hout of the window—"

"Stop!" cried the Coroner angrily, raising his hand, "I cannot permit this kind of evidence. Indeed, it is not evidence at all. You must simply reply to

the questions put to you. I told you before that you must not volunteer your opinions."

"Very well, sir, very well," returned the butler, still unabashed, "'ave it your own way, by all means. But I tell you it was the med'sin as done it."

An unpleasant pause ensued. Then the Coroner asked gravely:

"Are there any bottles left containing samples of the medicines administered to Lord Luxmore?"

"There was a whole row of them in a cabinet in the study," said Mrs. Vayne. "But they are not there now."

"They are in my possession," explained Michael Dred. "Their contents will be analysed as soon as possible."

"I tell you, 'twas the med'sin as done it!" repeated the wrathful voice of the butler, from the distant seat to which he had perforce retired.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

EDWARD BELL'S accusation of Dr. Hale produced a marked effect upon the jury. Bell was well known in the neighbourhood of Luxmore. His talkativeness and his willingness to gossip with the shopkeepers of the village had made him for years past the one authoritative source of information upon all matters concerning Lord Luxmore and his household, and a mere hint from the garrulous butler was as convincing as a newspaper paragraph. His loyalty to his master was never questioned, and, even though his denunciation of the family doctor imputed so sinister a character to a professional man who was held in esteem second only to the vicar himself, yet Bell was in a position to know the closest secrets of the deceased nobleman's family, and his friends among the jurymen shook their heads wisely, and were decidedly of opinion that there might be more in his suggestion than appeared on the surface.

The curiously-baffled look that of late had been so frequent on Michael Dred's face flitted across it again. He gave forth no opinion, but muttered a stifled exclamation of impatience. Lena Luxmore breathed more freely, because this sudden turn in the suspicions drew the circumstantial evidence yet further aside from Paul Wingrove. Glancing up at Paul, she saw astonishment and disbelief marked upon his face. Beatrix betrayed no feeling whatsoever. But a visible

satisfaction looked out from Mrs. Vayne's handsome black eyes.

On silence being restored, the Coroner called Mrs. Vayne before him. She approached the table with a self-important dignity that might have befitted a duchess, and stood awaiting the questions in an attitude of easy self-possession. It occurred to Paul that Mrs. Vayne's mood had become quieter and more suave of late.

The Coroner addressed her.

"Lord Luxmore, although in the enjoyment of fairly good health, was, I believe, accustomed to receive periodical visits from the doctor?"

"Yes. Dr. Hale came once or twice every week."

"What was the date of his last visit?"

"On Tuesday morning, the day of his lordship's death. He called at about eleven o'clock."

"Who was it that usually took charge of the medicine and administered it?"

"Edward Bell."

"No one else?"

"No one."

"Did you notice if the medicine had any perceptible effect upon Lord Luxmore's health?"

Mrs. Vayne paused a moment, and then said, slowly and with extreme reluctance:

"My own impression is that, latterly at all events, his lordship was worse rather than better after taking it." There was a tremor in the witness's voice. "The butler first called my attention to this fact, and I spoke to Dr. Hale about it. He seemed surprised, and told me that I was certainly mistaken."

"Were Dr. Hale and his patient on friendly terms?"

"As far as I know—yes. Dr. Hale has, however, shown some chagrin at the proposal that Mr. Reginald Luxmore should be set up as a medical practitioner in the neighbourhood. He probably feared the loss of prestige that must follow upon such a course."

"Was this proposal a recent one, then?"

"Yes; Lord Luxmore spoke of it only a few days ago, when he heard that his nephew was preparing for his medical examination. It was his lordship's intention from the first that Mr. Reginald should earn his own living, in case he should be prevented from coming into the title."

"Excuse me," interposed the family lawyer, "but how could Lord Luxmore have prevented his nephew from succeeding to the title?"

A sudden wave of angry red flushed Mrs. Vayne's naturally florid face.

"I think there was one way of preventing him," she said sharply. "The late Lord Luxmore was scarcely too old to marry a second time."

Mr. Roscoe smiled slightly. Mrs. Vayne was still handsome, and of an eminently marriageable age. The natural inference was that Lord Luxmore's assassin had cheated the lady housekeeper out of her dearest hopes.

At this point the door was opened softly and Dr. Hale entered. His appearance was the signal for a deep silence. Perfectly unaware of the attention he excited, he walked at once and unconcernedly to the place he had previously occupied. Almost immediately his name was called by the Coroner. He rose and approached the table in evident surprise at the prompt summons. Mrs. Vayne, who had regained her seat, seemed a little perturbed.

"In your previous evidence, Dr. Hale," began the Coroner—and the doctor instantly detected in his tone a change from courteousness with which he had previously addressed him—"you stated that the late Lord Luxmore was of good constitution, but that he was something of a *malade imaginaire*. Would you kindly give fuller particulars of his lordship's conditions?"

"Certainly," said Dr. Hale. "In the course of my

practice I have frequently met with such cases, particularly among elderly persons. Lord Luxmore, although he was always in fairly good health, was peculiarly nervous about himself. He fancied that he was, as he expressed it, 'off colour.' I have noticed that these indispositions had usually a mental source. They recurred when he had been annoyed or disturbed by anything. It was merely nervousness, requiring only the simplest treatment. I attended him regularly at his own request, and recently—within the past month or so—he has been more than ordinarily subject to these disturbances. I prescribed a tonic, which he took with beneficial results."

The butler burst forth into vehement contradiction; but was ordered to be quiet. Michael Dred moved forward slightly, and said, in a smooth, insinuating tone:

"Would you mind, doctor, mentioning the ingredients of which this tonic consisted? I presume they were quinine and iron—or, perhaps, a little arsenic? Arsenic is, I believe, considered a very good tonic alterative, is it not?"

Dr. Hale reddened and straightened himself up. He noticed the close attention with which his reply was awaited.

"My last prescription," he said, in a loud and somewhat defiant voice, "included a small proportion of the liquor arsenicalis—rather less, however, than the ordinary medical dose."

"What was the exact quantity contained in a dose as prescribed by you?"

"Three drops of the liquor arsenicalis, largely diluted with water. It was to be taken at first once a week; afterwards daily

"How long had Lord Luxmore been taking this medicine?"

"About a month."

"And how long could a patient safely take such

medicine at the rate of three drops of the arsenic liquid per day?"

"That depends entirely upon whether his system has already become accustomed to the drug. I may remind you that arsenic *can* be taken, in small doses, for any length of time with impunity, like opium. There are authenticated cases of men who consume six grains—enough to poison three persons—at one dose, without inconvenience. But Lord Luxmore was not inured to the drug."

The Coroner here interposed.

"What quantity of the pure arsenious acid would be contained in one bottle of your medicine?"

"Less than half a grain," replied the medical man, with some heat. "He might have drunk a whole bottleful without injury."

There was a movement in the court. It was felt that Dr. Hale was defending himself successfully.

"Were you latterly on friendly terms with the deceased?" pursued the Coroner.

"Perfectly friendly," answered the doctor. "His lordship was somewhat irascible, but I always got on with him very well."

"Had you any knowledge of the fact that Lord Luxmore intended to place his nephew in medical practice in this neighbourhood?"

At the word "nephew" Dr. Hale started, and his face clouded. He answered drily, "His lordship had more than once hinted at such an intention.'

"Was there any question of Mr. Reginald Luxmore becoming your partner?"

"None."

"Then, if he had been brought down here, it would have been to start in opposition to yourself? His practice would have injured you?"

"Presumably—yes," was the reluctant reply.

"That will do," said the Coroner.

Michael Dred, who had risen, now quitted the

room. He was absent several minutes, and when he returned Dr. Mortimer accompanied him.

"Dr. Mortimer wishes to return to town as soon as possible," said the detective, addressing the Coroner. "It might be convenient to question him now as to the contents of the bottles."

"Certainly," assented the Coroner. "I will take his evidence at once."

Dr. Hale sat bolt upright, bristling with surprise and indignation. But at the Coroner's first question he seemed appeased.

"Have you made any analysis of the bottle of orange wine, Dr. Mortimer?"

"I have," replied the physician. "The bottle contains nothing but pure orange essence, saturated with saccharine matter. There is not the slightest trace of poison in it."

A smile of peculiar satisfaction parted Michael Dred's thin lips. Dr. Mortimer continued:

"I have also made an analysis of two bottles of the medicine supplied to Lord Luxmore. One bottle was a full one, corked and sealed. But the cork was movable, and the seal was broken. Upon examining the liquid by the light, I noticed that the surface had a thin, dull film upon it, similar to the film which is produced by throwing wheat-flour into water. At the bottom of the liquid I observed, by means of a magnifying-glass, several minute pellets. I extracted some of these pellets by the aid of a test-tube, and, upon analysing them I discovered them, to consist of pure, dry arsenious acid. From the full bottle I obtained considerably more than three grains of arsenic."

"It is impossible!" cried Dr. Hale, starting up from his chair.

Suppressed ejaculations followed his almost frantic outburst. The physician at the table raised his hand as if to impose silence. Then he produced a piece

of wire, and held it up so that Dr. Hale could see it.

"You observe," he said calmly, "that this is a piece of burnished copper wire. If you will examine it, you will see that it has a steel-gray coating of metallic arsenic upon it. The fact is incontestable, and, as a medical practitioner, you should recognise it. But, lest you should doubt me, here is my test-tube," and he held up a glass tube and handed it to the Coroner, adding, "The little glistening crystals that you see within the tube are the crystals of arsenious acid."

Michael Dred took the test-tube in his hand, dislodged some of the crystals, and placed them on his tongue.

"Tasteless," he murmured, nodding his head. Then he lit a match, placed some of the crystals on the glowing end of it, and inhaled the fumes. He coughed slightly, and said, "Arsenic—beyond a doubt."

"Did you also examine the half-empty bottle of medicine?" he inquired of Dr. Mortimer.

"I have done so," was the reply, "and in it I have discovered the same drug, but in an extremely minute quantity—indeed, in a smaller quantity than the usual medical dose. The medicine, in fact, is simply a very ordinary tonic medicine, containing a few drops of liquor arsenicalis. I should say that in this bottle the arsenious liquid had been properly introduced by the chemist in the course of composing the medicine, whereas, in the full bottle, the dry, powdered arsenic had evidently been added afterwards by an unprofessional hand—and undoubtedly with malicious intent."

CHAPTER XV.

DR. HALE'S OPINION.

DAZED, with dilated eyes and countenance blank with consternation, Dr. Hale sank back into his chair. He was recalled, and at the sound of his name he rose mechanically and moved towards the table like one uncertain of his steps.

"You have heard Dr. Mortimer's evidence?" observed the Coroner. "How do you account for the circumstance that more arsenic has been found in a single bottle of the medicine than, according to your statement, you would have given the deceased in the course of a month or more?"

Dr. Hale drew the back of his hand perplexedly across his forehead.

"I cannot account for it," he said huskily. "I can only believe that someone has been tampering with the medicine. It is plain, from what Mr. Mortimer says, that the poison must have been dropped in after the medicine was made up. Somebody has been tampering with the bottle. That is the only explanation I can offer. There must be a plot against me—a plot to blacken my name and ruin my professional reputation. It is infamous that such a thing should be done!"

Beatrix Luxmore was staring straight before her with a stony glare in her eyes. Lena's nerves were tense with horror. She sat next to Lieutenant Wingrove, and her hand, icy and trembling, closed tightly on his.

"There is a curse upon this house," she whispered to him hoarsely. Others heard the whisper, and shuddered.

"Who dispensed your prescription?" asked Michael Dred, after a long pause.

"Mr. Walthew, the local chemist."

Instructions were given for Mr. Walthew to be summoned at once. In the meantime Edward Bell was once more examined. He took his place very promptly. He appeared to be greatly satisfied with the turn matters had taken.

"You previously said that, having noticed that the medicine had ill effects upon Lord Luxmore, you took it upon yourself to neglect to administer it."

"I did, sir. You're quite right there, sir, I told you it was the med'sin as done it. I 'ad my suspicions of the stuff for several days, and when Dr. Hale told me to give it to his lordship every day hinstead of once a week, well, I jest thought I'd do no such thing, and I didn't give his lordship any of it at all—not since last Friday."

"You are sure of that? Sure that you gave no medicine whatever between last Friday and the day of Lord Luxmore's death?"

"Quite sure. And, in my 'umble hopinion, he was much better without it."

"Your evidence is contradictory," said the Coroner a little impatiently. "At one moment you assert that it was the medicine that caused Lord Luxmore's death, and in the next you declare that his lordship did not take any for three days before he died. Can you swear that he had no medicine at all on Tuesday?"

"*I* didn't give him any," answered the butler significantly. "One of the young ladies might 'ave given it to him. And, if I may say so, Dr. Hale himself was in the 'ouse on Tuesday morning, and I won't say that *he* didn't give his lordship a dose."

The Coroner and Michael Dred exchanged glances, and the detective said something in an undertone. The butler continued, regardless of Dr. Hale's ill-concealed wrath.

"It's no more than three weeks ago since I 'eard his lordship saying, in a joking tone to Dr. Hale, that if he should marry again, his nephew, Mr. Reginald, would come down here as a doctor, and that he should give him a 'and in starting. Dr. Hale looked took aback, and afterwards, when he was leaving and I was 'elping 'im on with 'is hovercoat, he said to me, he said, 'Of course his lordship doesn't mean to marry again, does he, Bell?' He spoke as if it was a joke, but I could tell he was mortal hanxious, so I said, 'I'm not so sure about that, sir,' I said, and he went away as black as thunder. Ever since then he's been asking me questions about Mr. Reginald: 'Any more news, Bell? Has he passed 'is examination yet?' I said, 'No,' I said, 'not so far as I know. But I've 'eard that he's studying 'arder than usual lately.' At this, the doctor turned away, but he turned back again sudden, and said, 'Don't forget to give his lordship his med'sin regular. Give it 'im before lunch hevery morning.' I said, 'Yes, sir.' And I did give it him regular for a day or two—till I saw as it were doing 'im 'arm instead of good. Then I said to myself, 'Edward 'Enery,' I said, 'you were a downright fool not to 'ave 'ad your suspicions of that doctor before—'"

"Sir!" cried Dr. Hale, boiling with rage, and addressing the Coroner. "Am I to sit here quietly and be insulted by this idiotic servant?"

"I'd a deal sooner be a hidiot than poison a hinnocent gentleman who was paying me to keep 'im in good 'ealth!" the butler retorted as, at the Coroner's bidding, he slowly retired.

On the resumption of the inquiry after lunch, Walthew, the chemist, appeared, and, in reply

to the questions put to him, said, somewhat warmly:

"I've made up prescriptions for the Luxmore family for the last twenty years, and I have always been most careful with both the measurements and the quality of drugs I've supplied. I can take my oath upon it that I made up the tonic with absolute correctness. There was arsenic in it, but not one iota more than Dr. Hale prescribed. The proportion was about two drops to the dose, and the directions for taking it were written plainly on the label. I used the liquor arsenicalis as ordered. I never once used the dry arsenic. As for anyone else tampering with the bottle—well, I always sealed the corks myself and sent the medicine up to the house by the same boy. The boy is outside now, and you can ask him."

The boy was called. He was a smart little fellow in buttons, and he gave his evidence clearly and intelligently.

"I've delivered medicine at this house regularly for the past twelve months, and have always given the bottles into the hands of the butler. Last week I was sent twice—on Wednesday and Saturday. I came again on Monday. But on the last two occasions, sir, I didn't come to the house as usual. Dr. Hale met me at the lodge gates, and called me Tommy—which isn't my name—and said as he was going up to the house himself he'd take the medicine for me, and so save the long walk up the avenue."

"And you gave him the medicine?"

"Yes, sir."

At this juncture Dr. Hale again sprang up in his chair.

"These covert imputations against me are infamous!" he protested hotly. "And, since you have not respected my unblemished name and character, and my high professional standing, I will no longer

respect the honour of this stricken family. I will tell you what *I* think of this crime. For the sake of the Luxmore name I had resolved never to reveal my thoughts concerning it. But now I am driven to do so in my own defence. Let me ask you one question, gentlemen: *Where was Lord Luxmore's nephew on the day of the murder?* Mr. Reginald Luxmore was the person who would suffer most severely by his uncle's proposed marriage. What would have been my professional loss by his coming down here as a doctor, compared with his own loss of the Luxmore title and estates? It was to his greatest interest that Lord Luxmore should die rather than contract a union which might have brought him a direct heir. More than that, the nephew personally hated the uncle. The mental worry resulting from Mr. Reginald's wild conduct was the direct cause of his lordship's lately needing my attendance. You will say, perhaps, that Mr. Luxmore was far away from here at the time of the murder—as far away as he has carefully kept himself since. So far from this being the case, I declare to you that he was seen within a mile of this house on the very afternoon of his lordship's death."

A sound like a stifled moan came from Beatrix Luxmore's blanching lips.

CHAPTER XVI.

LOVE'S COMFORTING.

THIS suggestion that Lord Luxmore's nephew—now himself Baron Luxmore—was the mysterious murderer, took a deep hold of the public mind. Here at last, it seemed, was the solution of the terrible problem. Here, too, must be the explanation of the young peer's absence and silence on an occasion that might certainly count as one of the most important in his life. He was known to have been heartlessly desirous of his uncle's death. And yet when that death occurred, and he came into a title and an annual income of something over forty-five thousand pounds, he was neither to be seen nor heard of.

There was but one conclusion to be drawn from this, and people wondered why they had not thought of it before. They felt that they had been too quick to condemn Lieutenant Wingrove on a mere slender basis of circumstantial evidence. And, in atonement for the wrong their hearts had done him, they greeted him warmly on the following day, as he walked among the mourners in the dead peer's funeral *cortège*. There were many men of rank in that melancholy company, but the young naval officer looked the noblest among them. His fair, tanned face was the handsomest on which that day's pale autumn sunlight shone, and his form was the most erect and manly. He seemed to know that he had won back the popular sympathy, and a deep thankfulness and gratitude brightened the sadness of his frank blue eyes.

The appearance of the new Lord Luxmore at his murdered uncle's funeral would have gone far to dissipate the suddenly aroused suspicions against him. But, strange to say, he did not come. His absence formed the chief topic of local speculation and gossip for the rest of the day. The thin, limping figure of Michael Dred was also missed from the procession, in spite of the great detective's long-standing friendship with the deceased nobleman. It was understood that important business had temporarily recalled him to London.

To Paul Wingrove and Lena his absence was a relief. They breathed more freely. The atmosphere about them seemed to have grown lighter. Michael Dred's influence had been stifling in its far-reaching subtlety. The burden of his constant surveillance had been intolerably oppressive. During his presence in the house every single inmate, from the dead baron's daughters down to the humblest menial, had felt his or her smallest actions to be spied upon and recorded.

On the day after the funeral, Paul Wingrove walked up the avenue with a calmer spirit than he had known since the fatal hour that had seen Lord Luxmore's death. The horror of the tragedy was upon him still, but the worst of his anxiety had passed away. He was only anxious now about the mysterious telegram that had been despatched by Michael Dred to the *Berenice*. What could it mean? Innocent though he was, the stain of suspicion might yet wreck his life, blighting for ever the career that he had resolved should be so glorious. Night after night before he slept he prayed to God that his hopes might not thus be shattered—prayed that it might be granted him to keep his name unspotted, so that he might lay it at the feet of the woman he loved.

He stepped up on to the side terrace and thence entered the morning-room. The room was bright

with the afternoon sunlight, and decorated with masses of white chrysanthemums in bowls. And there, as he had hoped, was Lena, resting on a couch near by the crackling fire of sea logs.

She rose as he entered and crossed the floor to meet him, beautiful in her deep pallor. Her eyes, which through all this anguish had been tearless, shone with an unnatural brightness. It would have been better for her could she have wept.

She welcomed Paul with a wild eagerness greater even than the eagerness of love. It was as if his presence were driving away phantoms that had tormented her.

"Have you been alone here long?" he asked, alarmed at her look and at the dry heat of her hands.

"No," she answered, in a low voice; "I have only just come down from Beatrix's room. Beatrix is in a strange condition. I cannot understand it."

"Is she ill?" asked Paul anxiously.

"Not exactly ill," was the hesitating reply. "But her grief is dreadful to see. At times she breaks out into fits of sobbing that seem as if they would rack her life out of her. I did not think she loved our father so much. It seems she loved him more than I did."

"No, no," denied Paul; "that is not so, my darling. She could not have loved him so much. She disobeyed and grieved him, and you never did—never willingly. It is only that her grief shows itself outwardly, and yours does not. Oh, Lena, dearest one, I wish you would cry!"

"I wish I could," she returned, with a sigh. "It would relieve me. But I think horror froze my tears at their source."

"My poor love!" murmured Paul, tenderly caressing her dry, burning hand. "My poor, sweet love!"

"*You* SHALL *forget this time of trial.*" [Page 85.

She smiled with a tender sadness that made his heart ache. How lovely she looked, standing there in her long, clinging robes of black, with a single snowy chrysanthemum nestling at her throat to relieve the mourning sombreness.

"Paul," she cried suddenly, clasping his hands, "how long do you think it will be before we can get away from here—Beatrix and I? I cannot bear this place." She glanced shudderingly about the room. "It seems to be peopled with ghosts. I cannot sleep here. Whenever I close my eyes at night I see the library and—and the body lying across the floor, and I start awake, cold with horror. Many more such nights will kill me."

"Where will you go?" Paul asked quickly. He had not remembered that Luxmore was no longer her home, but that of the new Baron Luxmore when his lordship should choose to arrive.

"To my mother's jointure house—Cranleigh Hall in Norfolk. There, perhaps, we shall be able to forget—no, not to forget, that could not be—but to be free from these haunting terrors, this shadow of crime. Here the curse of murder is upon us, blighting our souls, freezing our blood."

Through one of the long French windows that had been left ajar the sound of bells came floating. A light as of new-found comfort broke over the young sailor's handsome face.

"Lena, darling," he whispered, "let us remember that, however dark our troubles, God's peace is over us all. The trouble will pass, but God's peace remains. Lena," he added resolutely, bending his head down close to hers, "you *shall* forget this time of trial. A year hence—if you will—my love shall teach you to forget it. The shadow of the crime shall be past, and all you shall remember will be your tender sorrow for your father's loss. Lena, my Lena! there is great happiness awaiting us."

She leaned her head against his shoulder, and the music of the Sabbath bells floating in at the window seemed to bless them. His words had soothed her, and she was dreaming of peace. She little imagined that with every fleeting moment the shadow of the crime was closing in upon her darker and darker yet.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN INEXPLICABLE GRIEF.

It was close upon midnight on Sunday when the spare, sinuous figure of Michael Dred turned up the main avenue of Luxmore Park. He walked swiftly, yet with a certain stealthiness that long years of detective work had made habitual to him. He carried a small black bag. His footfalls were noiseless on the damp, soft gravel. He passed like a shadow, for the night was dark. The wan October moon was hidden by ridges of cloud.

Suddenly, at the entrance of a tree-arched alley near the mansion, he stopped, listened, and then drew back out of possible view. A woman was parading there. Restless as a tormented spirit, she paced up and down the narrow walk, and when she came near where he stood he could see that her face was partly hidden in her hands. Sometimes she flung out her arms with a gesture of despair, and then again would press her fingers to her temples as if to still some painful throbbing there. She was Beatrix Luxmore.

Having satisfied himself as to her identity, Michael Dred stole softly away, and continued his walk towards the house. Concealed by the darkness, his countenance bore a wealth of expression such as none ever saw upon it in the daytime. His keen, alert eyes had a triumphant purpose in them; his sallow cheeks were faintly flushed, and his lips were compressed in the peculiar manner of men who observe much and speak little.

The door of the house was opened to him by a constable in charge. As he passed along the corridors on his way to his room the figure of Mr. Roscoe, the family lawyer, appeared at an open doorway.

Mr. Roscoe was a little old man, white-haired and slightly bent. The Luxmore tragedy had considerably shaken his nerves. Even now, as he spoke, he glanced apprehensively up and down the lamp-lit passage, as though he feared to see the phantom of the murdered peer gliding across the silent floors.

"I have been watching for you, Mr. Dred," he said, with a sigh of relief. "I don't like waiting about in this house at night. But I wanted to speak with you privately—to get your private opinion on this dreadful affair. I have a great respect for your cleverness, and I am sure that if any human being can probe this mystery you will do it."

Michael Dred had stopped, and stood, a sombre, impressive figure, with his keen face looking out from under the mass of brownish-black hair. He smiled at the lawyer's words.

"It is a terrible problem," he said gravely. "One of the most complicated cases I have had to deal with for many years. There are so many clues to follow, and also, I am sorry to say, so many apparent motives. This house," he looked with a shudder at the stately corridor walls, "has been divided against itself. Here have been jealousy, envy, filial disobedience. God's anger is upon it. There is but one truly good and noble figure within it, and that is the elder daughter. She is too good to throw herself away on such a man as Wingrove." He paused; then added confidently, "But I am coming near to knowledge of the assassin I have evidence—startling evidence. I cannot divulge it now; but I think I can promise you that soon—very soon—the mystery will be solved."

Mr. Roscoe retired, shuddering still, but visibly comforted. Michael Dred gained his own room,

locked the door, moved an easy-chair close up to the fire, and, sitting down, drew a photograph from his pocket and gazed at it with a fixed, stony gaze. Long he studied it, holding it with both hands almost tenderly. Then he laid it upon his knee, and, opening his black bag, took out from it several letters. He began to read these letters, nodding to himself occasionally. His face grew stern and resolute as he read. Presently he rose, went to the window, and looked out. A fine rain was falling. He thought of the figure pacing the alley below, and smiled sardonically.

"One would think Beatrix Luxmore was the victim of remorse," he muttered.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FIGURE IN THE DARK.

THE interest in the Luxmore tragedy rose to fever heat on the opening of the adjourned inquest on Monday morning. This increased excitement was due to the rumour that evidence was to be taken concerning the new Lord Luxmore's movements on the day of the murder. The fact that Michael Dred had been away in London on business connected with the crime was also regarded as significant. Hitherto the famous detective had expressed no opinion upon the mystery; neither was it possible for even the closest observer to determine from his look or manner whom it was that he most strongly suspected of the crime.

This morning, as he entered the court, he looked around him with a certain inquiry in his glance. Paul Wingrove was in his accustomed seat, handsome, with the morning light brightening his tanned face and close-curling, light brown hair. Beside him sat Lena Luxmore, deadly white, as always of late, but beautiful as a picture. Michael Dred's eyes dwelt on her long and steadfastly. Presently he approached her.

"Where is your sister?" he asked.

Lena caught the meaning of his question, and a tremor shook her.

"Beatrix is not here," she answered, in a low voice; "she preferred to stay away to-day. She is not well."

"Where is she?" the detective repeated sternly.

"I left her in the morning-room."

Michael Dred nodded and went out. A moment

later he entered the morning-room. Beatrix Luxmore who was seated by the fire, sprang up, startled by the noise of the opening door. At sight of him she drew back and a sudden trembling seized her.

"You are easily frightened of late," he said pointedly, fixing his pitiless, searching gaze upon her colourless face. "You do not have sufficient sleep."

Her pallor increased, her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"So you prefer not to attend the inquest to-day?" continued Michael Dred.

The words were quietly spoken, but she knew their meaning, and that of the look which accompanied them. She knew that he was challenging her, and in answer she darted him a glance in which defiance, hatred, and fear were strangely commingled.

"I am coming now," she said, in a strained, unnatural voice. And, as if compelled by his influence, she rose and went towards the door. But she walked unsteadily, and her face was ashy white. He thought how short a time it was since the rosy freshness of her cheeks had been her beauty's loveliest attribute.

On the entrance of Michael Dred, the Coroner opened the proceedings. Dred himself was the first person called upon to give evidence. He stood up, and took from his pocket a small portfolio, which he placed unopened upon the table.

"Mr. Coroner, gentlemen of the jury," he began quietly, "at this point in the proceedings it devolves upon me to make some statements bearing directly upon these investigations, and to set forth new evidence which will, I believe, throw startling light on the latest phase of this remarkable case. Before laying these new facts before you, however, I want to remind you of a circumstance which appears to have been hitherto little noticed—namely, the circumstance that the hasp of one of the French-windows in the library was found to be broken. There may be little

importance in this, it is true. But I mention it to show you that in concentrating your minds upon the theory that the murderer entered the room by means of the door opening from the inner corridor, you may be apt to lose sight of the possibility that the entrance was affected through the glass door opening into the grounds, and that when the fatal deed was done, the guilty person may have quitted the room by the same way. It will assist us materially if, before going any farther, we take evidence concerning the condition of that window prior to the time of the murder. I ask, therefore, that William Morton, stable-boy, may be called."

William Morton duly appeared. In answer to questions put to him, he said:

"I have, among my other duties, that of cleaning the windows. I cleaned the library windows on Monday morning last, and I then noticed that the hasp of the glass door had not yet been mended. It had been broken on the previous Saturday. The door could easily have been opened, either from the inside or the outside. The bolts were always drawn when the shutters were opened of a morning. When the butler called me on Tuesday evening and told me to ride off for the doctor, I paused outside the library window and saw that it was not quite shut. It was open about half an inch. I might not have noticed this but that I looked into the room to see if I could get a sight of his lordship."

"That will do," said Michael Dred. "And now," he added to the Coroner, "kindly call Mr. Paul Wingrove."

Paul, somewhat surprised, rose and advanced to the end of the table.

"When you left this house at a little after six o'clock on Tuesday evening," said Michael Dred, "which way did you turn?"

"I crossed the carriage drive to the lawn. Then I

"*I saw a woman's figure glide aside and disappear among the trees.*" [Page 93

turned to the right and took the path that leads into the narrow avenue."

"You did not go within sight of the library windows?"

"No. I should have had to turn to the left to do that, and I had barely time to catch my train."

"Did you, when skirting the house, hear any footsteps or see any figure stealing towards or from the library?"

"No. I neither saw nor heard anyone outside the house. But farther away—half-way down the avenue —I decidedly heard footsteps coming behind me."

"Ah!" broke in Michael Dred.

He was surprised to observe that Beatrix had bent forward eagerly, with a look of relief on her face. Paul continued:

"I turned round, thinking that perhaps someone had been sent after me to call me back. It was already dark, but in the darkness I saw a man's figure glide aside and disappear among the trees."

"You are sure of this?" Michael Dred's sonorous voice put the question imperiously.

"Absolutely sure," was the firm reply. "My eyes never deceive me." And the fearless blue eyes that had been trained to scan the vast expanses of the sea flashed as he spoke. "He was about fifty yards away from me. I cannot describe him, however."

"Did you call out to him?"

"No; I was in a hurry." A passing gleam of suspicion darkened the detective's eyes at this; but Paul concluded calmly, "I thought he was probably only a gamekeeper."

"You have said that when you were in the drawing-room alone during those enigmatical ten minutes you heard a movement in the conservatory. What kind of movement was it?"

"So far as I recollect, it was as though some

person were in there, moving about quietly. But the connecting door was closed."

"There are two doors to the conservatory, one leading from the drawing-room, the other leading into the grounds?"

"Yes."

"So that," pursued Michael Dred, speaking slowly and with a side glance at Beatrix, "it would be possible for anyone to leave the library by the unfastened French-window and slip round to the conservatory without going through the house?"

"Quite possible," said Paul.

Beatrix had sunk back in her chair, with her bloodless lips parted and her eyes open wide.

Lieutenant Wingrove was then dismissed, and Thomas Herbert called in his stead. He said:

"I have lived on the Luxmore estate for ten years, as head gamekeeper. On Tuesday evening last, after dark, as I was coming back from my rounds, I saw a man walking down the narrow avenue. He went out at the side gate near my cottage. I thought at first it might be Mr. Wingrove, but a second look told me it wasn't him. Whoever it was, he seemed to be slinking along as if he didn't want to be seen."

"Did you notice if there was anything peculiar about him?" asked Michael Dred.

"Well, sir," said the gamekeeper dubiously, "he walked as if he was lame."

Michael Dred nodded. A look of perplexed surprise came on the faces of Lena Luxmore and Mrs. Vayne. Beatrix stirred with visibly increasing uneasiness.

Before another word had been spoken, the door was opened abruptly, and a pompous gentleman with red whiskers strode into the room.

"Excuse me," he said, addressing the Coroner, "I am Mr. Curzon, the present Lord Luxmore's solicitor. I come on behalf of my client to convey to you his

lordship's deep regret that, owing to an injury to his knee-cap received a few days ago, he was unable on Saturday to attend his uncle's funeral."

"Ah-h!" said Michael Dred, in a droning, satisfied tone.

He saw Beatrix gasp, as if choking, and clench her small hand till the finger nails must have cut the flesh of the palm. A deep murmur went round the court. The injury to the knee-cap, coming immediately after the gamekeeper's statement that the man in the avenue walked lame, made a distinct impression.

"When was that unfortunate injury sustained?" inquired Michael Dred, with a shade of mockery in his tone.

"His lordship did not inform me," replied the pompous solicitor.

"*I* can inform you," rejoined Michael Dred sternly. "That injury to Mr. Luxmore's knee-cap was sustained on the evening of Tuesday last, the day of the late Lord Luxmore's death; and although it was, as you state, too serious to allow of his coming down here on Saturday, it did not prevent him from going to Newmarket to attend the races on the intervening Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. Indeed, he only returned to town on the Saturday evening—several hours after his uncle had been laid in his grave."

The jury stirred in their seats. Mr. Curzon stood aghast, blank-faced and silent. Michael Dred continued:

"On Saturday morning I went with a search-warrant to Mr. Luxmore's rooms in Maddox Street. Mr. Luxmore was away. As I had foreseen, he had not yet returned from Newmarket. In his letter-case I found several important letters bearing upon the present inquiry, and in his bureau I discovered a mass of papers, comprising several writs and summonses, and various other documents which go to

prove that Mr. Luxmore's pecuniary affairs were in a very embarrassed condition. It is not necessary to particularise these documents, with the exception of one, which shows that the young gentleman had at different times borrowed heavy sums, at a ruinous rate of interest, on the security of his succession to the Luxmore peerage and estates. It will be seen, therefore, that the marriage of Lord Luxmore, or even a rumour that he contemplated marriage, must have plunged his nephew into complete financial ruin and disgrace. Now I will proceed to show you that, on the very morning of the day of Lord Luxmore's murder, Mr. Luxmore received from his uncle a letter in which his lordship's approaching marriage was definitely announced. The name of the lady has already been mentioned in the course of these proceedings."

A pitiless sternness had passed into Michael Dred's swelling voice as he spoke. Condemnation, fierce and unsparing, was in his glance and gesture, and in the solemn grandeur of his attitude. His face was deeply flushed. Opening the portfolio which he had placed upon the table, he drew from it the letter of which he had spoken. There was a hush of expectation in the court.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FAMILY SCAPEGRACE.

"LET me impress it upon you," rang the detective's powerful voice, "that this letter was written by the late Lord Luxmore on the day before that of his murder, and was received by his nephew on the actual morning of the murder."

He unfolded the letter and read as follows:

"Luxmore Park,
"Monday, 14*th October*, 1872.

"SIR,—In response to your frantic appeal for more money, learn once for all that I decline to hold any further communication with you whatsoever, and that I am taking every step in my power to prevent my money or anything else pertaining to me from ever coming into your hands. It is terrible that my life should be embittered by the conduct of undutiful children, and that the eldest son of my favourite brother should turn out the scapegrace that you have proved yourself to be. I repeat that, whether she likes it or not, my daughter Beatrix shall never speak to you again. Far from being worthy to marry my child and succeed to my name, you are not even fit to be what I intended you to be—a doctor. You have failed in your examinations, and will always fail in everything so long as you remain a gambler, a wine-bibber, and a spendthrift. I wash my hands of you from this day forth. It is useless for you to appeal to me. I will not help you with another penny.

Within three days from the time you receive this letter, my approaching marriage with Lady Ormidale will be publicly announced. "LUXMORE."

Astonishment was on the faces of the Luxmore family. Beatrix sat as one paralysed, with both her slender arms hanging inertly down. To Lena's anxious inquiries she answered nothing, but darted a look of anger from eyes that were dulled with fear.

"This letter," pursued Michael Dred, "was the latest of a series of letters written within the past few weeks. The fact that these letters had been written without my knowledge rather surprised me, as Lord Luxmore was accustomed to consult me with regard to his family difficulties. On the same Monday on which this letter was written his lordship wrote also to me, asking for information concerning his nephew's movements. I had long been aware of the ruinous condition of Mr. Reginald Luxmore's affairs; indeed, during several months I had been exercising a close, though unsuspected, surveillance over his daily life."

"Spy!" cried Beatrix Luxmore, starting up from her seat.

"Silence!" said the Coroner sternly, and the angry girl was drawn back into her seat by the astonished Mrs. Vayne. Michael Dred merely smiled, and went on:

"He had already lost his own small property of Bevendean by successive mortgages, and, although he is only a bachelor of twenty-seven, he is in debt to one creditor alone—a Mr. Isaac Solomons—for over thirty thousand pounds borrowed money, the bulk of which has been lost on the Turf. His position, on receiving his uncle's last letter, was, therefore, a desperate one. The announcement of Lord Luxmore's approaching marriage would put a stop to the patience of his numerous creditors. The result, for

him, would be immediate and permanent ruin. Now, let us see in what mood he received that ominous letter."

Elizabeth Robins, the housekeeper who attended on Mr. Luxmore at his rooms in Maddox Street, was called by the Coroner to give evidence. She deposed that during the whole time that Mr. Reginald Luxmore had occupied the rooms in Maddox Street he had been harassed by financial difficulties. These difficulties seemed to have reached their climax in the week preceding Lord Luxmore's death. During that week he said to her repeatedly that if his uncle didn't help him he didn't know what he should do. She remembered his receiving his uncle's last letter. A few minutes after entering the breakfast-room he rang the bell violently, and when she went up he was as white as a sheet and stamping about the room. He had the letter in his hand, and he told her what was in it—that his uncle refused to help him, and was going to marry again. He said that ruin stared him in the face. He then asked for a time-table, and directly after breakfast he started off just as he was, without saying where he was going or taking a portmanteau, as he usually did. He returned at about eleven o'clock at night, looking very much upset and agitated, and walking lame. He said he'd hurt his knee getting over a stile. There was a telegram waiting for him, which she believed was the one announcing his uncle's sudden death. She did not see him read it. He took it into his bedroom.

In answer to further questions the witness said that she had, on more than one occasion, heard Mr. Luxmore say that he wished Lord Luxmore were dead. He had said it when he was in a rage, or when his creditors were troubling him. So far as she knew he was not in the habit of keeping chemicals in his study, but she had more than once seen bottles there labelled "poison." On the same Tuesday morning

when he received Lord Luxmore's letter he had also received another letter bearing the family crest.

This concluded Mrs. Robins's evidence. Michael Dred then rose and took a second letter from the portfolio before him.

"This," he said, "is the second communication of which the last witness has spoken. I deeply regret the necessity which compels me to read it, and thereby to lay bare thoughts and feelings never intended for public knowledge. But, in the endeavour to get at the truth of this mystery, individuals must not be spared. This letter is from the Hon. Beatrix Luxmore to her cousin, Mr. Reginald Luxmore, and was received by him on the morning of his uncle's murder."

Again Beatrix started forward. But the detective's inflexible voice never hesitated. He went on in firm distinct tones :

"Luxmore Park, *October 14th*, 1872.

"DEAREST REGGIE,—I am awfully sorry to hear of your terrible trouble. But it only precipitates the carrying out of our intention. We must stand firmly together, come what will. I shall be in the conservatory to-morrow at six o'clock. It will then be dark, and quite safe. Bring with you the—the thing that is to seal our fate and bind us together for all eternity. Be careful that you are not seen. You had better come and return by Blythedale Station.

"Now and always, your ever devoted

"TRIX."

"Beatrix!" exclaimed Lena, more deadly pale than before.

The silence of consternation reigned for an instant in the room. All eyes were turned on the dead peer's younger daughter, who sat rigid as marble, with her eyes closed, and no trace of colour about her save the gleaming gold of her hair.

The letter was now in the Coroner's hand, and his voice broke the significant hush, calling upon Beatrix Luxmore to give evidence. Beatrix still sat motionless. Lena rose, and, going to her side, touched her arm, and said gently, "Come." The touch seemed to rouse the distressed girl. Supported by her sister, she slowly got up, and made her way unsteadily to the table. There was a deep pathos in the sight of these two women, both so lovely, and one so noble in her loveliness, advancing in their black robes to confront the Justice that was seeking to discover the assassin of their father. Beatrix's face had the livid pallor of fear; in her eyes was a hunted look, mingled with despair and a dumb, suppressed rage.

Before questioning her the Coroner addressed a few words to Michael Dred.

"Lord Luxmore will presently be required to give evidence. Can he be found?"

"He is at this moment on his way from London," replied Dred. "A carriage has been sent to the station to meet him."

"Very well."

The Coroner raised before Beatrix Luxmore's eyes the letter which bore her signature.

"You have heard this letter read," he said. "Did you write it?"

"I did," came presently from the trembling girl's white lips.

"In it," pursued the Coroner, "you request Mr. Luxmore to bring something—'the thing that is to seal our fate.' What was that thing?"

Beatrix swayed a little, wildly, blindly. Then she defiantly met the Coroner's stern gaze.

"I cannot tell you," she answered him.

Michael Dred smiled. In the deep hush the breathing of those present was almost audible.

"Beatrix! Beatrix!" appealed Lena, who still stood by her sister's side.

"I warn you," said the Coroner, "that by declining to answer this question you incriminate yourself. I ask you again: What was that thing which you desired your cousin to bring with him?"

Beatrix straightened herself up. Her fair young face became hard and dark.

"I refuse to tell you," she cried.

Her defiant voice had scarcely died away when the rolling of carriage wheels was heard on the gravel outside.

CHAPTER XX.

BEATRIX'S LOVER.

AT the sound of those carriage wheels Beatrix Luxmore thrilled visibly, and a deep crimson flush overspread her face that an instant before had been startling in its pallor. She lifted her head proudly in a listening attitude. Meanwhile it was evident that her refusal to answer the Coroner's last question had turned the tide of feeling strongly against her. Distrust and suspicion were written clearly on the faces of all in the room except Lena and Paul Wingrove. Lena was trembling with a vague dread of things yet unrevealed. What had Beatrix done? In what position had Fate secretly placed her, that she could not tell the truth openly and unflinchingly?

The Coroner had made a long pause, as though hoping that the witness would yield. But the face and attitude of Beatrix showed inflexible determination. The Coroner moved impatiently, and at last spoke again.

"On the first day of the inquest, you denied having seen anyone between a quarter to six and half-past six on the fatal evening. Do you still deny that, during that time, you saw the butler at the drawing-room door, and told him not to light the lamps?"

"I decline to answer that also."

"She did! She did!" called out the butler from his seat at the back of the court.

Beatrix turned on him a look of withering contempt.

"Beatrix, dearest—for your own sake!" pleaded Lena.

But Beatrix did not heed her. She was still listening, and now and again she glanced back expectantly in the direction of the door.

The Coroner proceeded with increasing sternness:

"Why were you so anxious that the house should be kept in darkness?"

Still the slender figure, tragic in its rigidness, remained unmoved, and the girl face, ordinarily so tender and fair, kept its look of cold antagonism. The Coroner, indignant, turned to the jury and said:

"Gentlemen, I hope you will take due note of this witness's reluctance to give evidence."

And, amid a chill, condemning silence, Beatrix Luxmore turned from the table to go back to her seat.

"Lord Luxmore has now arrived," said Michael Dred to the Coroner in an undertone.

"I think, then, that he had better be called at once," said the Coroner.

Beatrix again glanced anxiously towards the door. Paul Wingrove's eyes followed hers. He had never yet seen Reginald Luxmore, and he felt a keen curiosity concerning this young peer, upon whom so dark a shadow was lowering. He felt that with the first look at the man's face he should know instinctively whether or not he was the murderer.

The heavy door was opened violently, and the long-expected young man suddenly appeared. He walked slightly lame, as though his injured knee-cap was still painful to him. He was rather below the middle height, but powerfully built, and with great natural dignity. He was handsome, with dark hair and moustache, and heavy dark eyes that had a weary and not altogether pleasant look. There was a certain recklessness about his expression and manner

that even his mourning clothes—which were elegant to the point of affectation—could not wholly disguise. He was evidently excited and annoyed.

Paul distrusted him. In this first moment he felt that the new Lord Luxmore was such a one as might well have dropped the poison into the glass for the doomed peer to drink. Glancing round he noticed that Beatrix's dulled eyes had grown brilliant, and that the flush which the mere sound of her cousin's approach had aroused was deepening vividly on her cheeks and brow. For an instant Lord Luxmore's glance met hers. But he did not approach her. He strode straight to the table, and brusquely addressed the Coroner :

" I should like to know, sir, what the meaning of all this is—the breaking into and ransacking my rooms in my absence, and the bringing me here as if I were a felon ? The drawers of my bureau have been forced open, and important legal documents stolen, and among them many private letters and papers that cannot possibly be of use to anyone except myself. I repeat, what is the meaning of all this ? Why is my personal liberty restricted ? Why am I to be made a victim of meddling detectives and policemen ? "

" The police have simply done their duty," replied the Coroner coldly. " And now I must require you to give evidence."

Unwillingly, and with a flash in his heavy eyes, the young man took the oath. The gaze of the whole court was fixed upon him, but Beatrix's most intently of all. Her blood, so frozen a few moments before, seemed now to run like fire in her veins. She listened for the first question.

" Your name is Reginald Luxmore, and you are the eldest son of the late Charles Luxmore of Bevendean, and nephew of the recently deceased Baron Luxmore ? "

"Yes."

"You are now, by succession, Baron Luxmore?"

A gleam as of satisfaction shot across his dark eyes as he answered:

"Yes."

"Since the death of your father, two years ago, you have, of course, looked forward to succeeding to the Luxmore peerage?"

"Naturally," was the coolly-spoken answer. "I was my uncle's legal heir."

"And you even went the length of borrowing money on the security of your prospects?"

The witness frowned and bit his under-lip.

"I do not see that that question affects the case," he said haughtily.

"Never mind that," rejoined the Coroner severely; "kindly answer it. Did you borrow money on the security of your prospects?"

"I did. I had a perfect right to do so."

"Certainly," the Coroner assented; and then continued: "During the week or fortnight immediately preceding your uncle's death you were, I believe, in serious financial difficulties?"

"Mr. Dred has doubtless given you so much information on that point that it would be useless for me to attempt to deny it," was the defiant reply.

"So that," pursued the Coroner unsparingly, "the sudden raising of any obstacle between you and your succession to the Luxmore estates would have been disastrous to your whole career?"

"Undoubtedly," returned the young man, with a nonchalant smile.

The Coroner leaned a little forward in his seat, steadfastly confronting the witness.

"Now, on the morning of Tuesday last—that is, on the day of your uncle's murder—you received a letter from his lordship in which, amid expressions of anger,

he definitely announced his intention of raising such an obstacle?"

Lord Luxmore shot a swift glance of bitter resentment at the sallow, sardonic face of Michael Dred.

"I did receive such a letter, certainly," he said; "but what does that prove?"

"After the evidence supplied by that letter," went on the Coroner calmly, "I need hardly ask on what terms you stood with the deceased peer. But tell me this, was your uncle aware of the full extent of your embarrassments?"

"Probably," sneered the witness. "Michael Dred was careful to keep him well informed on that point. And here I may say that all the quarrels between my uncle and myself were the work of this meddlesome detective. He spied upon me day and night for months, dogging me everywhere and reporting everything to my uncle. He turned the old man's mind against me."

The Coroner motioned to him to be silent, and continued with his questioning.

"Besides your financial difficulties and the general irregularity of your life, there was, I believe, yet another cause of disagreement between the late Lord Luxmore and yourself. In this letter of which we have been speaking, you are peremptorily forbidden to hold any further communication with your cousin Beatrix. From this I assume that you had been a suitor for your cousin's hand, and that your uncle disapproved of you as a possible son-in-law?"

"That is so," responded the young scapegrace carelessly.

Surely his tone must have sent a pang through Beatrix's heart. He did not look an ideal lover as he stood there in an attitude of sullen impatience, with his head thrown angrily back and his jaded face darkly flushed.

"Nevertheless," said the Coroner, "in spite of her

father's disapproval, your cousin Beatrix wrote you a letter, in which she arranged a meeting with you in the conservatory of this house at six o'clock on the evening of the crime. Was it in consequence of that letter—which you received by the same post with your uncle's—that you started for Luxmore early on the Tuesday morning?"

"No. It was in consequence of my uncle's letter solely," was the haughtily resentful reply.

"The tone of Lord Luxmore's letter and the announcement of his intended marriage had, no doubt, mortified you extremely?"

"I was somewhat annoyed."

"What was your object in starting immediately for Luxmore?"

"I was fool enough to think that by a personal interview I might bend my uncle's will," savagely answered the young peer, with a curl of his full upper lip.

"And you failed to do so?"

"I never got the chance. I didn't have the interview."

Michael Dred spoke to the Coroner in a low voice, handing him a letter.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LIE DIRECT.

THE Coroner nodded, and continued with deepening earnestness:

"When you travelled from London, you went beyond Luxmore, and alighted from the train at Blythedale station, as you had been recommended to do in your cousin's letter?"

"Yes."

"What was your cousin's motive for making that recommendation?"

Beatrix held her breath to catch the answer. It came promptly.

"I don't know."

"Then why did you follow her advice? Why did you not get out of the train openly at Luxmore station as usual?"

The witness shrugged his shoulders, but gave no other answer. On the question being pressed, he replied that he had no reason to give.

"Kindly let us have an account of your movements on Tuesday last, from the time of your arrival at Blythedale station to that of your return to Maddox Street at night."

"*At night!*" echoed the young man, as if startled.

He moved impatiently, and drew his thick, dark brows together for an instant. Beatrix Luxmore shivered a little.

"What is the object of this questioning?" he cried angrily. "Why am I to be bated like this, here in

my own house? I presume, sir, that you are not here to inquire into my private affairs, but to investigate the cause of my uncle's death."

"That is precisely what we are doing," answered the Coroner gravely. "You must answer the questions put to you. Describe your movements on the day of the murder."

"It is inevitable," said the eyes of Beatrix, and the witness obeyed.

"I arrived at Blythedale at about noon, and started at once to walk towards Luxmore Park—"

"Why did you not drive?" interrupted the Coroner.

"Because I was in no hurry. I was still undecided whether or not to present myself before my uncle. I wanted to think over the matter."

"Lord Luxmore, I believe, had forbidden you to come again to his house?"

"Yes," answered Reginald Luxmore, his fingers working nervously. "But I didn't mind that. If I had thought my talking would have any effect on him I should have gone. I hung about for a long time, and had lunch at the Three Reapers before I made up my mind whether to go or not. At last I determined to go, and had got as far as the stile leading into Luxmore Woods when I met Mrs. Vayne."

"H'm," said the Coroner; "it is rather strange that that lady never mentioned this encounter. Was she driving?"

Mrs. Vayne had risen, as if about to speak, but was forestalled by the witness's prompt reply:

"No. She was on foot—taking a short constitutional, she said."

"Some words passed between you, of course?"

"Yes; I told her of the letter I had received from my uncle that morning, and of the announcement of his coming marriage. She said, sharply, that she knew of it already. She did not appear pleased to

see me. I have never been a favourite of hers. When I asked if it would be of any use my speaking to my uncle, she said decidedly, 'No.' She said Lord Luxmore was an obstinate, unreasonable man at the best of times, and that she had left him that day in a particularly irritable mood. She added that if I went up to the house he would, in all probability, only turn me out, without hearing a word of what I had to say. As for my idea of persuading him to forego his project of marriage, that, she said, was impossible, for my uncle was ridiculously in love with Lady Ormidale—that he constantly wrote to her, and continually gave her extravagant presents, though he grumbled at his daughters' simplest expenses—and that, far from being likely to forego the marriage, he was urging her ladyship to allow it to take place at the earliest possible opportunity. In short, Mrs. Vayne advised me to turn back at once, and I did so."

Mrs. Vayne looked annoyed at being thus dragged into notice. There was a painful flush on Lena's beautiful face. She had put out her hand and touched Paul Wingrove's, as though outwardly expressing her heart's bitter conviction that he was the only one of all those about her in whom she could entirely place her trust. He answered her look with a tender smile of love and comfort. For once they were unobserved by Michael Dred, who seemed absorbed in himself. His face had reddened, and his features were working with curiously unwonted emotion.

"When you turned back," the Coroner was saying, "did you leave the Luxmore grounds?"

"Yes."

"What did you do next?"

Reginald Luxmore glanced at Beatrix, who sat like a waxen figure amid her falling robes of black. Her eyes met his with caution and assurance in their

look. After an instant's hesitation he replied boldly:

"I returned to Blythedale station, and took the first train back to town."

The cynical smile that was habitual with him played upon Michael Dred's lips. A look of disconcerting sternness came upon the Coroner's face.

"Then you failed to keep the appointment made by Miss Beatrix Luxmore?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You are sure, Lord Luxmore?" thundered the Coroner's voice.

The blood ebbed from the young man's cheeks, but he answered passionately:

"Am I to understand that you doubt my word?"

There was a faint murmur in the court. In the opinion of many present Reginald Luxmore was being treated with unnecessary harshness. But the Coroner persisted unrelentingly.

"If you are speaking the truth, what is the meaning of this letter?" and, unfolding a sheet of notepaper that lay before him, he proceeded to read from it. A deep hush fell on the court.

"Luxmore Park,
"Wednesday morning, *Oct.* 16, 1872.

"REGGIE—dearest now, as always—I have hardly presence of mind enough to write to you. The awful discovery was made by Lena. Oh, the horror of it! I thought I should have gone mad when I saw him lying there, and knew—and knew—but I must not say it. My brain is in a whirl. Oh, surely I am the most unhappy being on the face of the earth!

"There is talk of Lieutenant Wingrove being suspected. Everyone believes he was the last to see my father alive. Michael Dred has been telegraphed for. Do not come down here. Who can say what the consequences would be if anyone should discover

that you were here last night in that terrible hour? I cannot tell you how relieved I was to find you were gone when I rushed back from the library. I implore you not to come down. You will learn what goes on from the newspapers. I cannot write again—not yet. But believe always in my love, even though the worst should happen, and even though that love has brought me wretchedness unspeakable—a misery that will never leave me any more while I live. *Destroy this letter!*—Your despairing "BEATRIX."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CIRCLE OF LIQUID.

BEFORE the Coroner's voice had utterly died away, a low, sharp cry startled the attentive and shuddering silence of the court. Beatrix Luxmore had sunk back fainting in her seat.

"This is worse, far worse than death," murmured Lena, with a ring of anguish in her voice. Paul Wingrove sat silent, utterly baffled and astounded. Mrs. Vayne looked vaguely horrified.

But the greatest effect produced by the reading of this letter was on young Lord Luxmore himself. He had not feared the letter, because, until that moment, he had not known of its existence. It had arrived while he was away from home, and had been awaiting him, unopened, at the time of Michael Dred's raid upon his rooms. The detective had promptly secured it, and now it came to give the wild young man the lie direct. He recoiled a pace or two, muttering some inaudible words. His blanched cheeks reddened again.

"It is plain, therefore," said the Coroner, "that you were not only in this house on that Tuesday, but that you were here—and here secretly—at the actual time of the murder. You have been guilty of flagrant perjury. It is deeply to be regretted that a man of your high rank should have placed himself in so disgraceful a position. But, having so far compromised yourself, you cannot hope to be spared. A strict inquiry must now be made into your movements on that

evening. It is now proved that you were in this house. At what time and in what manner did you make your entrance?"

"Allow me to explain," prefaced Lord Luxmore, in a voice of subdued rage, "that it was for my cousin's sake that I just now denied having been in the house. I did not expect the existence of that hysterical letter which Mr. Dred so cleverly discovered. As a matter of fact, I entered the lodge-gates at dusk—about half-past five, two hours after my meeting with Mrs. Vayne."

"Did you immediately enter the house?"

"No. I loitered about outside the library windows."

This statement produced a sensation. It was probably unknown to the young lord that the library windows had been suspiciously referred to in evidence. After a pause, the Coroner asked, with marked emphasis:

"When you were outside the library windows, did you see or hear anything unusual going on within the room?"

"I heard high voices. My uncle was angry, as usual. I said to myself that I was evidently not the only man whom my uncle quarrelled with."

"How long did you remain outside those windows?"

"I loitered about close by there till I thought it was six o'clock. Then I went round to the conservatory."

"Did you notice that one of the library windows was a little ajar?"

"I did. If it had not been ajar I could not have heard the quarrelling."

Paul Wingrove shivered involuntarily. Had this rascally nephew been a witness and an auditor in those dreadful moments when he had believed himself to be alone with the old baron?

"Are you sure that it was exactly six o'clock when, as you say, you left the library windows and went round to the conservatory?"

"It was after six," replied the young man, with an unbecoming carelessness of tone. "I had heard the clock strike a few minutes before."

"How did you gain entrance to the conservatory?"

'By the outer door."

"Then you did not go through the house at all?"

"No."

The foreman of the jury here rose.

"It would materially assist us," he said, addressing the Coroner, "if at this point it could be determined more definitely whether the poison was administered in the medicine—whether anyone else in the house gave the medicine to the deceased on the butler's neglecting to do so; or whether, on the other hand, we are to suppose that the poison was contained in that wineglass on the library table. This matter seems to us to be important, mainly with regard to the actual time at which the fatal dose was administered."

"I understand your difficulty," replied the Coroner. "You feel that it is useless to take minute evidence as to anyone's movements on that evening until it has been definitely ascertained whether the poison was given by means of the medicine—which would only have been accessible to persons in the interior of the house—or whether it was put into the wineglass in the very room which the deceased occupied at the moment of his death. In the latter case, of course, the murderer could have accomplished his or her guilty purpose by entering through the window."

"This is a point which I can throw some light upon," said Michael Dred, rising suddenly.

The Coroner leaned back in his seat, giving way to the detective. Lord Luxmore, interrupted in his evidence, sat down in the nearest chair. Michael Dreds strong voice rang on the stillness.

"I do not advise you," he said, addressing the jury, "wholly to dismiss the theory which would point to the medicine as the instrument of death. Neverthe-

less, I would have you remember that the fact that a large quantity of arsenic has been found in one of the medicine bottles does not prove that the intending murderer did also seek to hasten his victim's death by poisoning the orange wine that Lord Luxmore is known to have drunk only a few minutes before his awful end. It is even conceivable that the arsenic was put into the medicine bottle merely as a blind. The bottle of tonic was full. So far as we know, Lord Luxmore had taken none of it. But we know that he took the contents of the wineglass, and it is, therefore, of the highest importance that we should prove beyond a doubt whether or not those contents were poisoned.

"The fact that the wineglass was, when empty, stealthily removed from the library, and the other fact, that it has been broken, are matters of greater moment than almost any other portion of the evidence that we have heard. It is also significant that, save for a tiny fragment of the stem, no other portions of that wineglass have yet been found. But before speaking further on this point I should like to put a question to Lieutenant Wingrove."

Surprised, Paul Wingrove rose and approached the table. Michael Dred directed his attention to a small table that stood in the window embayment. Paul recognised it as the table that had stood beside Lord Luxmore's chair in the library.

"Will you please take a wineglass from the sideboard and place it as nearly as possible on the same spot where the glass of orange wine stood on Tuesday evening last."

Without hesitation Paul did as he was desired.

"Thank you," said Dred. Then he turned to Lena. Curiously enough, his voice softened whenever he spoke to her.

"Miss Luxmore, will you kindly go to the small table and indicate the spot on which, after your

father's death, you observed the circle of liquid left there by the glass?"

"It is the same spot as that on which the glass now stands," replied the anxious girl, without rising; "about four inches from the edge."

The detective continued his remarks to the jury.

"On receiving the telegram that announced to me this terrible tragedy," he said, "I sent instructions that the room in which it had occurred was on no account to be disturbed. Immediately upon my arrival here from London, I made a thorough inspection of the library. I examined the small table. The photograph, the books, and the cigar-box were upon it as described by Lieutenant Wingrove. The wineglass alone had been removed. But the person who removed it, with the carelessness so often shown by even the most cunning criminals, had forgotten one thing. The circle of liquid left by the glass had not been wiped off. Even after an interval of so many hours there was still some moisture visible where the glass had stood. In that moisture, gentleman, there were two flies. Those flies were dead."

The jury nodded silently. A half-stifled exclamation broke from Lena Luxmore's lips. She clasped Paul's hand closely, while her beautiful blue-gray eyes had a fixed look, as though they gazed into the future. What looming shadows of horror and fear did they see that they clouded so darkly?

Michael Dred's convincing tones sounded again:

"Had there been only one dead fly, I might not have given the matter a second thought. But the fact that there was more than one may, I think, be taken as a proof that the orange wine that Lord Luxmore drank from that wineglass was charged with poison. It is probable—but not certain—that the same hand that put in that poison afterwards carried the empty glass away. That the glass was taken out of the room through the door leading into the inner

corridor is proved by the fact that the only portion of it in our possession was found on the floor of that corridor. The stem of the glass was frail, and it was no doubt broken by the too desperate grasp of a nervous hand."

Michael Dred sat down. The eyes of the jury seemed to turn instinctively towards Beatrix Luxmore. But Beatrix appeared to be relieved rather than fear-stricken. Lord Luxmore sat with his heavy eyes bent on the floor, which he was impatiently tapping with his foot. Mrs. Vayne looked sombre. Bell, the butler, a little more haggard than before, sat gazing intently on Dr. Hale, who seemed to be studying the panelling of the ceiling. Lena sat as if in a dream, her eyes absently attracted by the sparkle of the brilliants in Michael Dred's scarf-pin. The Coroner was busy writing. When he looked up, it was to continue the examination of the living Lord Luxmore.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CLANDESTINE MEETING.

"How his face has changed!" exclaimed Lena, in a whisper to Paul Wingrove, as young Lord Luxmore again stood up for examination.

Paul assented. Her remark had been correct. During the last few moments a deeper trouble had clouded Reginald Luxmore's tired features. A nervous apprehension lurked in his dark eyes, yet his full lips were firmly set, and his whole manner was even more defiant and dogged than before. He stood haughtily awaiting the Coroner's question.

"When you entered the conservatory at, as you say, something after six o'clock, you saw there your cousin, Beatrix Luxmore?"

"Yes."

"What was she doing?"

"She had been cutting flowers."

"How long did you remain in the conservatory?"

"I should say about a quarter of an hour."

"Did you see anyone else during that time?"

"No."

"At the end of that quarter of an hour did you leave the house?"

"No. My cousin took me into the inner drawing-room. I did not, of course, wish to be seen by any other member of the family."

The Coroner nodded. A deep silence prevailed in the court.

"It was then dusk, I believe?"

"Yes, deep dusk."

Lord Luxmore shuddered a little as he spoke. His face was growing darker and more rigidly set.

"How long did you remain in the inner drawing-room?"

"I cannot tell the exact time. But it was until the alarm was given from the library."

"What was the 'alarm'?"

"The voice of Miss Luxmore calling for help."

"It would, one would think, have been the most natural thing for you, upon hearing that call, to go to the room from whence it came. Why did you not do so?"

"I did not know what had happened," answered the young lord, in a restrained voice, "and I did not wish to be seen by my uncle." He moved restlessly. "My cousin Beatrix, also, did not wish it to be known that I had been in the house."

Many eyes turned towards Beatrix. By sheer force of will she had conquered the faintness that a short time before had overpowered her, and now sat white as a figure of marble in the depths of the oaken armchair in which she had been placed. Her large, brown eyes dilated at the mention of her name.

"Was your cousin with you during the whole time of your presence in the house—that is to say, from the moment of your entering the conservatory to the moment when you heard the cry for help from the library?"

Beatrix bent forward anxiously, clutching the arms of her chair. Her eyes were fixed upon her lover as though she sought by the intensity of their gaze to compel him to turn towards her. But for once their witchery failed. He did not turn. After a moment's hesitation, he answered:

"No. At about the middle of our interview she rose abruptly and left me for a few minutes."

"There!" broke in the butler shrilly, from a dis-

tant corner. "That was when she come and told me not to light the lamps."

Beatrix's face darkened, and her small, white hand clenched and unclenched itself fiercely. Bell was peremptorily silenced, but his remark evidently led to the next question.

"The inner drawing-room where you sat was in darkness, was it not?"

"Except for the firelight, yes."

"When your cousin left you, did you hear her speaking to anyone?"

"No. The door between the drawing-rooms was shut. My cousin shut it when she went out, probably in order that anyone chancing to enter the drawing-room might not see me."

"How long was she absent?"

"I think about five minutes."

"You say she left you abruptly. Did you know where she was going?"

"No."

"Did she go to the library?"

"I have told you that I do not know." The answer was steady, but the witness's cheek flushed.

"Was there any change in her manner when she returned?"

"I did not notice," replied the witness, after an instant's hesitation.

The Coroner's expression betrayed that he doubted the accuracy of this reply.

"Had she anything in her hand?"

"No."

"What was the subject of the conversation between you when she returned after quitting the room?"

"We did not speak—at least, we spoke very little."

"Did she show any agitation when the cry for help came from the library?"

"*I got out by climbing the orchard fence.*" [Page 123.

"She would naturally do so, the cry being one of distress."

"What did she say?"

"She urged me—entreated me—to go away. I then left the house."

"It is certainly surprising," commented the Coroner, "that, recognising the cry to be one of distress, you, a member of the family, should have rushed away like a culprit, instead of going to inquire into what had happened and to offer assistance."

"I cannot help it if it seems odd to you," was the nonchalant reply.

"Upon hearing the cry, did you or your cousin go out of the room first?"

"My cousin. I left immediately after."

"By which door?"

"The conservatory door—as I had come."

Lord Luxmore was noticeably brief in his replies. Every fact had to be dragged out of him by a separate question.

"You had not even taken a formal farewell of your cousin?" The witness shook his head. "Did you wait about at all in the hope of seeing her again?"

"No. I went away directly. I intended to catch the 7.30 train back to town. But when I was a little way from the house, I stumbled and hurt my knee."

"Where did that happen? Give the precise spot."

The young man hesitated.

"It was at the stile that leads from the orchard into the park."

This statement was received with some astonishment.

"Then you did not go out by the gate near the gatekeeper's lodge?"

"No. I did not wish to be seen by any of the servants. I got out by climbing the orchard fence."

"What time would that be?"

"I don't know exactly—before seven o'clock. I

walked to Blythedale station and took the nine train back to London."

There was a pause. Then the Coroner asked:

"As a medical student, of course you are accustomed to have poisonous drugs in your possession?"

"At times, yes."

"You are aware, of course, that it is difficult for the ordinary public to get possession of any other form of arsenic than the arsenic of commerce, which is coloured with indigo? As a medical student, you would, I suppose, be able easily to obtain the pure, white arsenic powder?"

"Certainly, if I needed it," answered the young man carelessly.

"In your cousin Beatrix's letter to you, received on the day of the murder, you were asked to bring down with you something, the name of which is not given—'the thing which is to seal our fate,' as it is referred to in the letter. What was that thing?"

Lord Luxmore moved impatiently.

"I decline to say," he answered irritably. "I do not see why unimportant matters should be dragged into evidence in this way."

"It is for the jury to judge what is and what is not important," returned the Coroner severely. "Your refusal to answer will only incriminate you."

"I cannot help that," was the sullen retort. "I decline to answer. I don't see why my private affairs and those of my cousin should be needlessly exposed to gratify the curiosity of this court."

The court was, in truth, very curious. What was the hidden romance between this graceless young nobleman and the slender, flower-like girl, who, since her father's death, had been as one crushed to the ground by some overwhelming guilt?

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CASE AGAINST REGINALD LUXMORE.

"THERE is another question I wish to put to you," said the Coroner imperatively. "Have you, in the course of your evidence, withheld anything that might tend to throw light on this inquiry?"

Lord Luxmore was silent.

"You cannot answer?"

Silence still. Reginald Luxmore drew himself up and stood in gloomy defiance. A deep and bitter prejudice was growing up against him in the minds of those present. The Coroner bent forward and began to speak again. His irascible face had reddened ominously. His position at that moment was not an enviable one. He was divided between his official duty and his knowledge that the man whom he addressed was a peer, a great man in the county, and —more embarrassing than all—his own landlord.

"I am bound to say, Lord Luxmore, that the manner in which you have given your evidence would justify the jury in entertaining the very gravest suspicions against you. Your position with regard to the deceased, and the bitter ill-feeling which existed between you, established against you a very powerful motive for desiring your uncle's death. By a strange coincidence—if it was nothing more—the time of that death was also the time of a desperate crisis in your own career. The poor old nobleman was violently deprived of life at the precise juncture when his

continuance in life would have brought about your ruin."

Lord Luxmore winced. The Coroner went on mercilessly:

"On the day of the murder you came down to this place clandestinely, and with rage in your heart. Your movements throughout that day were vague and inexplicable—certainly not the movements of an honourable man acting honourably. You have to-day perjured yourself flagrantly and deliberately with regard to one of the most important points of the evidence—that as to whether or not you entered this house on the fatal day. But for your cousin's second letter—of the existence of which you were ignorant—your falsehood might have passed unchallenged. The explanation you have since offered the court, in excuse for that falsehood, is an utterly weak one. It is undoubtedly very wrong to connive with a wild and wilful girl to disobey her father; but that misdemeanour is as nothing compared with the awful suspicion which now rests upon you."

Lord Luxmore started and looked up, as if about to speak; but, although his lips moved, no sound came from them. The Coroner's condemning words gained in solemnity from the high worldly station of the man to whom he spoke.

"Your explanations as to your movements in the neighbourhood of the scene of the murder—and, I may add, at the time of the murder—are extremely unsatisfactory. Your story leaves the most important ten minutes of the whole evening imperfectly accounted for. Lieutenant Wingrove, in his evidence, has deposed that he left the library at ten minutes to six o'clock. From that time until six o'clock—an interval during which no one else but Lord Luxmore is known to have been in the library—you were, by your own admission, loitering about the library windows; and one of those windows was ajar. You

saw no one about who could have entered the library by that window while you were there; and yet, if the mysterious assassin had gained access to the room by the door leading from the hall, he or she would, in all probability, have been seen by the butler or by some member of the family. Your conduct afterwards, while you were in the drawing-room, seems to have been marked by a most significant fear of being discovered. When you heard Miss Luxmore's cry for help, instead of taking the manly course of going to see what was the matter, you hastened away in the manner of one who had anticipated the alarm and knew its cause too well. You were urged to this flight by Miss Beatrix Luxmore, whose timorousness on this occasion seems hardly consistent with her reputation for reckless independence of character."

A sudden spasm, as of physical pain, passed over the contemptuous face of Reginald Luxmore.

"Stealthily as you came, so you departed," pursued the merciless voice of the Coroner. "The announcement of your uncle's death appears not to have taken you by surprise, although it was to you, in your desperate circumstances, at once the least expected and the most desirable of events. Again, although you were ready enough to come down here under the ban of your uncle's forbiddance, yet neither natural grief nor the duties of your new position as head of the Luxmore family proved a sufficiently strong inducement to bring you here after the crime had been committed. You went to Newmarket Races instead, and have had to be brought here at last at the summons of the law. Finally, you absolutely refuse to explain away a very suspicious sentence in one of the letters addressed to you by your cousin—namely, the sentence in which she asks you to bring down with you 'the thing' which was to seal your fate and hers. All these facts combined tell strongly against you, Lord Luxmore, and I feel

it my duty to warn you that you must either vindicate yourself or be prepared to accept the consequences."

Lord Luxmore's features had recovered their sullen calm. He lifted his head with a haughty gesture, and, looking straight at the Coroner, said :

"The jury are of course at liberty to construe my evidence in the way they think best. On one point only can I say anything more, and that is the point last mentioned. The mysterious thing which I was requested to bring down—and which, after all, I did not bring—was an engagement ring. My betrothal with my cousin Beatrix Luxmore was to have taken place that evening—secretly, of course. It did not take place, however, for reasons which need not here be publicly proclaimed. Have you any more questions to ask of me?"

"Not at present."

Lord Luxmore than retired from the table. Something of his recklessness of look and bearing had disappeared ; his weary face was haggard, and his eyes seemed darker and heavier than before. Beatrix was leaning back in her chair, with her eyes closed, and her pale profile outlined against the dark oak. She opened her eyes as her lover approached. Perhaps the quicker beating of her heart had told her of his nearness.

"Reginald!" she murmured. But he passed apparently without seeing her, and went straight to a seat near his lawyer, the pompous Mr. Curzon. There he sat silent, with his elbow leaning on the panelling of the wall beside him, and his left hand shading his down-bent eyes.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SHADOWS DARKEN.

In the momentary pause that followed, Lena Luxmore rose and went to her sister's side.

"Beatrix, dearest, wouldn't you like to go away from this room for a time?"

Beatrix nodded faintly in assent, and rose. Lena beckoned to Paul.

"I am going to take Beatrix to her room," she whispered. "Then I will come downstairs. Wait for me in the morning-room."

Paul Wingrove obeyed gladly. He, with his sea-inspired love of brightness and freedom, was tired of the constraint of the court, sated with its revelations of falsehood and its dark atmosphere of undiscovered crime. He breathed more freely as he entered the morning-room, where the terrace windows were open, and the cold, pure air was sweet with the fresh smell of autumn flowers. This room was the only part of the house that seemed yet unpolluted by the horror of murder. It was the only room in which, since the crime, Lena Luxmore could bear to remain.

Closing the windows, Paul stood by the mantelpiece, awaiting his love. It was not long before he heard the approaching rustle of her trailing skirts. Her eyes met his look of loving welcome with an agony of trouble in their beautiful depths.

"Oh, Paul! What can it be that is oppressing Beatrix so? What can it be but— Oh, no, no, no!"

With the wildness of sudden self-condemnation, she covered her face with her hands. In a moment her lover's arms were round her, and his hands, so tender in their strength, drew her head against his breast. "Paul," she whispered, looking up at him, "I was wicked enough to think—God forgive me!—that she, my own sister, might be—*guilty!*"

"No, dearest, no," he answered soothingly. "It is not she who is guilty. It is *he*."

Lena started from his clasp.

"Paul! You believe that?"

"I do," was the solemn reply. "I do, most surely. And she knows. It must be the knowledge that is breaking her heart."

Lena sank down into a chair. Against the background of its blue upholstery her pure, white face and dark, shining hair formed a picture of loveliness ever new to the man who gazed upon it.

"Then, for you, this mystery is solved?" she said under her breath.

"Yes," answered Paul Wingrove decisively. "I believe he entered the library by the window, after I had left. His heart was hot and bitter, and in a moment, in the dusk, he dropped the poison into the glass. It may be that, at his bidding, Beatrix afterwards fetched the empty glass from the room, and he carried it away with him. We do not know. God help her if it be so! Oh, my darling, think of the agony of it—of knowing that the one you love has the guilt of blood on him!"

Lena clasped her hands in silent anguish. Paul, kneeling beside her, drew her ice-cold fingers towards him, pressing them to his heart. As he did so, her sleeve caught in the knob of a small drawer in a cabinet beside her, and the drawer was pulled open. Paul caught sight of a photograph within.

"Who is that?" he asked quickly.

Lena glanced at the portrait.

"Lady Ormidale," she answered, with a shudder "It is strange, but I cannot help feeling that that woman has been the cause of the calamity that has fallen upon this house. She is lovely, isn't she? The portrait used to stand on the mantelpiece, but Mrs. Vayne put it out of sight."

"The face is something like yours," said Paul, still gazing at Lady Ormidale's picture.

Lena smiled faintly.

"So father used to think," she murmured.

At that moment footsteps were heard approaching, and Paul sprang to his feet. The young Lord Luxmore entered the room.

He had greeted his cousin Lena already that day. He asked her now to introduce Lieutenant Wingrove to him. Meanwhile he advanced towards Paul with outstretched hand.

"It is as well that we should make each other's acquaintance, Wingrove," he said. "We have known each other by name for years past, and I knew the Bishop, your father."

But the handsome young sailor drew back. His sea-blue eyes had grown stern; his face, in its frankness and brightness, contrasted strangely with the jaded countenance of the man before him.

"Excuse me, Lord Luxmore," he said coldly. "I cannot take your hand."

Reginald Luxmore stood for a moment as one suddenly petrified. Looking at Lena's face, he saw written upon it approval of what her lover had done. Then, flushing darkly, he turned and went silently away—not from that room only, but from the mansion and domain of Luxmore. None saw him go. He passed out stealthily and secretly as on the fatal evening when the late Baron Luxmore had been sent to his last account.

. . . . .

It was near the close of the day's proceedings when

Paul and Lena re-entered the court-room. Michael Dred was speaking; his remarkable form and face had a dignity that was almost grandeur, as the sonorous tones of his voice rang through the room. But Paul did not at first notice him. His eye had been caught and startled by the blue jacket and lurching attitude of a man-of-war's man. The seaman stood listening intently to Michael Dred's words. He held his cap in his hand behind him, and Paul Wingrove read upon it the name "H.M.S. *Berenice*."

At the sound of the closing door the tar turned round, recognised the lieutenant, and promptly saluted him.

"Marlowe!" exclaimed Paul, amazed. "Why are you here?"

A puzzled grin came on the jovial face.

"Well, sir, I don't 'ardly know what I've come for. Special sarvice o' some sort, I b'lieve. It seems as you've got into shoal water, sir, somehow. Howsebeit, the cap'n sent me off wi' this yar coat o' yourn, bein' as it were wanted, and a parcel for Mr. Michael Dred, which the gentleman as is now speakin' 'ave just opened."

"What does he mean?" asked Lena, in sudden fear, gazing at the heavy ulster that hung over the sailor's arm.

"I cannot understand," said Paul, in a low voice. "But we shall hear in a moment."

They turned to listen to Michael Dred. His voice had grown louder and more resonant, compelling attention.

"I have already proved to you," he declared, "that there was poison in the wineglass, and the mysterious disappearance of that wineglass has always seemed to me to be a matter of the gravest importance. Ever since the opening of this inquest I have been searching for that glass or its fragments. In this quest I have left no inch of ground unscrutinised, and no ditch or

brook in the neighbourhood unsearched. At last, as a result of my correspondence with Captain Fortescue, of H.M.S. *Berenice*, I have received a letter, brought by this sailor, which gives information of an important discovery."

The detective paused, and beckoned to the sailor.

"Mr. Marlowe, will you step forward?" Then he glanced at Paul. "Lieutenant Wingrove, will you kindly tell the jury if that overcoat is the one you were wearing when you came to this house on the day of Lord Luxmore's death?"

"It is the one," said Paul.

Lena's pulses slackened with the chill of a vague fear. For support she leaned her hand on the back of a chair that stood near her.

"It is the one," repeated Michael Dred, as if to convince himself. "Very good. Gentlemen," he continued, again addressing the court, "in this letter Captain Fortescue informs me that on Saturday last, in compliance with instructions received, he caused the pockets of this overcoat to be searched, with the result that several pieces of glass were found, which appeared to be portions of a broken wineglass. These fragments of glass are now in the parcel before me."

He handed a small cardboard box to the Coroner.

Paul Wingrove stood silent and immobile. Lena swayed a little, and rested her hand more heavily on the chair before her. A film came before her beautiful, fear-stricken eyes; the room reeled round her. She was conscious of a few minutes of breathless silence, during which an examination was made of the contents of that cardboard box, and then, like a voice from out the distance, the Coroner's voice fell on her straining ear:

"I have no doubt of it. These fragments match

the portion of the stem already found, and they also match the other glasses of the same set. They are incontestably the missing portions of the mysterious wineglass."

CHAPTER XXVI.

GONE!

At the Coroner's announcement, delivered with a grave emphasis which left no room for further doubt, all eyes were turned upon Lieutenant Wingrove. Calm still in manner, but with his brows contracted and his bright, handsome face pale with consternation and perplexity, the young sailor pressed forward to the table.

"Will you allow me to look at these pieces of broken glass?" he asked the Coroner.

"Certainly," was the reply.

Michael Dred held out the cardboard box, so that Paul could see into it. The fragments were small, but there was no mistaking the fact that they formed portions of a wineglass exactly similar to the one that was alleged to have contained the poison. A sample glass of the same set still remained, with other articles of evidence, upon the table. Paul took up this glass and carefully examined it. There were three fine lines cut upon its circumference. He picked out from the box a small fragment that was similarly marked, and compared the two. The perplexity deepened on his face as he laid them down again.

"Well," said the Coroner, "what explanation have you to offer, Lieutenant Wingrove?"

"I can offer none," answered Paul calmly, "except the theory that I am the victim of a malicious plot. I am bound to say that the glasses exactly resemble each other." He glanced about him, and then added

warmly: "If these fragments had been sent here by any other person than Captain Fortescue, I should have suspected that someone was playing an evil jest with the view of incriminating me. But glasses of this pattern are rare." He paused, then continued more earnestly: "The circumstance of the broken pieces being found in my overcoat pocket is utterly inexplicable to me. I can only give my word of honour that I knew nothing of their being there."

There was a momentary silence in the court. His earnest voice and fearless bearing had created an impression. Even those who liked him least felt that his "word of honour" was not a thing to be scoffed at. He looked across at Captain Fortescue's messenger.

"Marlowe," he said.

"Yes, sir," answered the jovial tar, saluting him.

"From whose hands did you receive this parcel?"

"Please, sir, from Cap'n Fortescue's. And, beg pardon, sir, but if I'd a known 'ow the wind were a-blowin' in this 'ere quarter, sir—if I'd a known as it was *you* as were bein' court-marshalled—I'd a cut my own 'and off, ay, or my 'ead either, sooner than fetched the blamed thing along o' me. But, bein' as I didn't know, why, 'ow could I 'elp a-bringin' o' the parcel w'en the cap'n giv' me my sailin' orders from 'is own lips?"

"You have done your duty, Marlowe. Never mind me," answered the lieutenant. And, quitting the table, he walked back to Lena, who had sunk into the chair against which she had a moment before been leaning.

Meanwhile Michael Dred and the Coroner were consulting together in an undertone. Presently the Coroner spoke aloud to the jury:

"I had hoped, gentlemen," he said, "that to-day, or, at farthest, to-morrow, I should have been able to ask you for your verdict and to dismiss you. I am extremely sorry that the numerous and perplexing de-

tails of this case have required from you so prolonged an attendance here. But you, of course, understand as well as I do that this is no ordinary inquest, and you will, I am sure, agree with me that, however inconvenient it may be to yourselves, it is absolutely necessary that we should receive and consider most minutely every shred of evidence that can be brought to light. There still remain several witnesses to be examined, and you will recognise that the discovery of this long-missing wineglass requires that the movements of Lieutenant Wingrove on the night of the murder shall be more completely investigated than they have hitherto been. I will now adjourn the inquest until the usual hour to-morrow morning."

"Mr. Coroner!" One of the jury had risen somewhat indignantly, and was speaking in querulous protest. "Can you give us any idea when it is probable that this inquiry will end? Is my shop to go to rack and ruin all on account of my being kept here day after day? I can't afford to lose any more time in this way! I think at least you might have managed to let us off for to-morrow, being market-day."

"I cannot help it, Mr. Pepper," returned the Coroner decisively. "It is impossible for me to relieve you. Others besides yourself are put to considerable inconvenience."

The jurymen filed slowly out of the room. The reporters closed their notebooks with sighs of relief after their long day's work. The two lawyers, Mr. Roscoe and Mr. Curzon, strolled out together in grave silence. While the Coroner was giving instructions for the locking up of the articles of evidence, Michael Dred rose from his seat and moved quietly towards Lena Luxmore.

Lena shivered at his approach, as though a wave of cold had passed over her. She looked up at him. A certain gaiety was on his face. And yet his eyes, that were seeking hers, had a far-away look in them.

"This is the result of your message, sent some days ago," she murmured. "But it is a false result. It can come to nothing. Knowing Paul Wingrove as you do, how can you doubt its falseness? And yet you follow it up. Mr. Dred, you are cruel! You are merciless! Have you no pity for me?"

With the liberty of old friendship, he took her hand and held it for a moment with a courteous tenderness that might have fascinated any other woman.

"I do no more than my duty, Miss Luxmore," he said quietly. "My part is simply to use my experience in searching for evidence. It is for the jury to determine the value of the evidence I gather. You will believe me when I say that I had no idea that the necessary search of Mr. Wingrove's clothing would result in so compromising a discovery. Where is your sister Beatrix? I trust she is—"

He stopped abruptly and turned slowly away. Mrs. Vayne had come to Lena's side. The lady housekeeper was not looking quite so well-preserved as usual. Her native decorum was upset, and—a thing very unusual with her—she was inclined to be talkative.

"Dear, dear, dear!" she said excitedly. "What a very dreadful thing this is about Mr. Wingrove! Really, unless he explains this away, I don't see how you can—" Something in Lena's face stopped her. She went off on a different tack. "I have ordered dinner to be served here in the dining-room this evening, now that Reginald has come. Had you not better go and lie down, Lena, dear? You are looking very ill. I am afraid this terrible discovery has unnerved you. Let me take you into the drawing-room."

Lena shook her head. But, looking round for Paul, she gave him her hand, and they went out together. They did not speak until they reached the inner drawing-room. And then, as Lena sank down on a

settee, Paul knelt on one knee beside her, in the lonely silence and the rapidly-fading light.

"My darling, tell me—shall I go away? Not away from this place—I cannot do that—but away from your close presence, from your sweet intimacy, from the circle of your love, until the truth has been discovered, and this cloud is lifted from me. Lena!" he appealed, with a ring of wild pain in his voice, "do you doubt me now? Has this fearful discovery shaken your faith? You have only my word to go by. Dearest, tell me what to do. I will obey you in everything. You have the right to command me now."

"Only your word to go by," she murmured wonderingly. And then, understanding his humility, reading by the insight of love what anguish was in his heart, she stretched out her arms and clasped them about his neck. "Paul," she said softly, "when will you learn that your word is to me the greatest assurance the whole world could offer? Is it so very long since I told you that if you had been found with the poison cup in your hand I yet should know you innocent? I only suffer from this suspicion because it sullies you in others' eyes—you whom I want always to shine so bright, so stainless, without fear, and without reproach. Do you not reflect that in doubting me so you are sinning against me—against our love?"

The old brightness came on his face, the old light into his eyes.

"My darling!" he breathed fervently, reverently. "If more women loved and trusted as you do, there would be fewer bad men in the world."

There came a sound of footsteps. He sprang up from his kneeling attitude. Mrs. Vayne entered the room.

"It is very odd," she said. "Lord Luxmore cannot be found. They are searching for him everywhere, but cannot see a sign of him."

"He's gone?" cried a voice from the threshold. Beatrix, haggard and wild, was standing in the doorway, her hands locked together, her attitude despairing, her fair young face convulsed with grief. "Gone! gone! And he'll never come back—never again!"

Acting upon a sudden impulse, Paul went to her and caught her arm.

"Beatrix," he said gravely, imploringly, "was it you who put the broken wineglass in the pocket of my overcoat. Tell me the truth, for Lena's sake. Beatrix, answer me—answer me truly, before heaven. Was it you?"

Lena bent forward. Mrs. Vayne was closely occupied in arranging the cushions under her head. Beatrix met the young officer's half-imperious, half-entreating look with wild denial.

"No, no! It was not I—it was not I!" she answered him.

Advancing into the room, she went to the settee where Lena lay. She seemed in an instant to have forgotten the presence of others, even though her sister's form reclined there before her eyes.

"It was here that we sat," she muttered to herself. "Here that we sat and talked. Oh, if I had only known! And now he is gone, gone—and a curse is on us both!"

She sat down at her sister's feet, and, hiding her face in her hands, broke into violent, tearless sobs.

Paul look at Lena.

"Do you see the meaning of this?" he cried. "Lord Luxmore has not dared either to eat or sleep within these walls."

CHAPTER XXVII.

LADY ORMIDALE.

"LORD LUXMORE is below, my lady, and asks to see you."

It was evening. The rose-hued light of two tall lamps revealed the small but luxurious drawing-room of a house in Mount Street, Park Lane. The room was beautifully furnished, and here and there, scattered about, were costly nick-nacks that probably had been presents from the late Baron Luxmore. On a couch near the fire reclined a very handsome woman of about twenty-seven years of age, elegantly dressed in black and gray—a combination that suggested partial mourning. She had been reading an evening newspaper, but at the footman's announcement it dropped from her hand. She raised herself to an upright attitude, and stared at the man with her blue eyes dilated and the blood ebbing from her cheeks.

"*Lord Luxmore!*" she repeated, in a voice of awe.

"The young Lord Luxmore, my lady."

"Oh!" she sank back on the couch with an expression of relief. "I will see him," she added, after a moment's pause of doubt.

The footman departed. She rose and went to a mirror, to see that the little loops of hair about her forehead were becomingly arranged. As she turned from the glass the door was again thrown open, and the name that had been announced there so often sounded in her ear once more.

"Lord Luxmore."

The man who advanced towards her was young in years, but worn with the knowledge of life. His face, pale and jaded, was as the face of one condemned to some terrible doom. His dark hair was in slight disorder, and his heavy eyes looked as if they would willingly have closed, never again to open upon the world.

"You do not know me, Lady Ormidale," he began quietly, "except probably by name. You may have heard my uncle speak of me. Certain circumstances which have recently occurred compel me to come to you in this abrupt way. I am Reginald Luxmore."

"I am pleased to see you," said the young widow, in a reserved voice. It was quite true that the old baron had spoken to her of his nephew. But his remarks upon him had been by no means flattering.

In his turn, Reginald Luxmore looked at her. She was very lovely. And those magnificent eyes of changing shades, now deepest blue, now violet, now darkest gray, reminded him of the eyes of his cousin Lena. His glance flashed over her, observing every detail of her beauty and her dress, from the waves of her brown hair to the silver embroidery on her dainty shoe.

"Your name startled me," she added now, with a faint, cold smile. "I did not think of the new baron. I almost thought for a moment that it was the—the dead come back."

"I wish it had been so," muttered young Lord Luxmore gloomily. Declining a chair he walked slowly to and fro over the carpet. "I would give—I would give my own life now to bring my uncle back again to this world."

She was silent.

His eyes caught sight of the evening newspaper, lying on the carpet as if it had fallen from her hand.

"You have been reading about the inquest," he said,

with a piercing eagerness of tone. "What do you think of the case? Who do you think—?"

He broke off, watching her face. She averted her eyes.

"I cannot think," she said coldly, distrustfully. "I am still too crushed by my own loss, and too overwhelmed by the horror of it all. I have not yet read the evidence given to-day."

Reginald Luxmore drew a deep breath, as of relief. Then he threw back his head with a movement of despair.

"Life can be more horrible than death," he rejoined, in a thick voice. "It is not my uncle who has suffered most in this tragedy. His agony lasted only for a moment. But ours—when will ours end? We who are left living in that house of tears are a prey to horror and doubt and fearful expectancy, tormented day and night with visions from which nature revolts."

Lady Ormidale looked at him in astonishment. Was he mad that he spoke like this? What did he mean?

He misinterpreted her look. Approaching her he sat down by the side of a small table that stood near her.

"I must tell you why I have come here," he said nervously. He glanced at a clock that stood on the table. "Seven o'clock. I have no time to lose."

His haggard look at last stirred the beautiful woman to pity.

"You will not go yet, surely, Lord Luxmore?" she said. "You must stay and dine with me. I shall be alone this evening. Mrs. Singleton, my companion, has gone out."

He shook his dark, handsome head.

"I cannot stay. I must leave here before half-past seven." Leaning his arm upon the table, he bent forward: "Lady Ormidale, I have sought this interview with you because, as my uncle's successor and re-

presentative, it was my duty to see you before I went away. I am going away to-night—for ever."

"Where?" asked the surprised lady, with wonder in her tone.

"To the remotest corner of the earth," he answered. His voice now was calm again, strangely, terribly calm. But his hands trembled. "I am going away because there is a ban upon my life."

The gleam of a sullen despair had come into Reginald Luxmore's eyes as he spoke. His thick, dark brows contracted.

"Yes—a ban upon my life," he repeated hoarsely, "a dark and bitter curse, withering up in a day the poor remnant of youth that my follies had left me. My future is ruined. It will be—not a blank; that I could endure—but a long, awful nightmare, with an eternal memory burning red amid the terrible blackness. I must go away. And yet, though I fly to the ends of the earth, I cannot escape from myself, from my inward misery. My heart and mind are possessed by demons. I am the most wretched and most tortured man living in this world."

Lady Ormidale, forgetful alike of coquetry and reserve, gazed at him in growing wonder.

"Are you well, Lord Luxmore?"

He laughed bitterly.

"As well as I shall ever be again. But it was kind of you to ask me." He glanced furtively about the room, and then continued hurriedly, but in a softer voice: "Lady Ormidale, I am come to do my duty towards you as my uncle would have wished me to do. You were his affianced wife, and I am informed that at the time of—of his death, arrangements were pending for the settlement upon you of a large sum of money. I propose to settle upon you for your lifetime five thousand a year, out of the revenues of the estate—"

He stopped. The lady was shaking her head.

"I do not require the money," she said. She wondered at his offer, since, if report spoke true, he himself needed the whole of the fortune he had inherited, perhaps at the cost of his soul. "I should prefer not to take it."

He inclined his head silently and rose, without repeating the offer. Lady Ormidale rose also and held out her hand.

"Is there a prospect of the mystery being soon solved?" she asked, in a curiously meaning tone, fixing her eyes searchingly upon him.

He passed his hand over his brow in a dazed way.

"The account of to-day's proceedings will tell you all there is to know," he answered at last, with a short, hard laugh, that grated on her ear.

"It is strange," she murmured, "that with Michael Dred at the head of the investigation, the affair should not already be cleared up. His insight is usually as swift as it is sure."

Reginald Luxmore turned upon her suddenly.

"Do you know Michael Dred?" he asked.

"I have seen him in your uncle's company," she answered carelessly. "Lord Luxmore had a very great regard for him."

The young Lord Luxmore's gloomy face grew gloomier still.

"I hate him!" he said fiercely. And again he glanced about him with a half-hunted, half-defiant expression in his eyes. Then he looked back eagerly at the amazed face of the beautiful woman before him.

"Lady Ormidale—"

He seemed about to make an appeal to her, but stopped himself and turned away.

"Good-night—and good-bye."

"Lord Luxmore, what does this mean?"

"Nothing—nothing. Forget that I have been here. And yet—" He stopped and looked back. "Lady

Ormidale, will you give me the only comfort it is in your power to give?"

"I will do what I can."

"Then promise me that at any time, in case of need, you will help my cousin Beatrix. Lena may marry by and by, and leave her, and then she will need help —only heaven knows how sorely. Will you go to her in any hour of crisis and comfort her?"

"I will. I promise."

"Thank you."

A moment later his strongly-built figure and handsome, haggard face had passed from her sight for ever. He was hurrying along the lamp-lit streets, where, at every turn, his shrinking, tingling ears were assailed by the newspaper-boys' cries:

"Special edition! The Luxmore tragedy! Evidence of Lord Luxmore!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RETURN OF AN OLD LOVER.

ABOUT half an hour before the re-opening of the Coroner's inquest on the following morning, Lena Luxmore left the breakfast-room and went to the library. Often of late she had entered the sombre room, gloomy now not only by reason of its black oak ceiling and high panellings, but also because of the crime that it had seen, and of whose secret its grim walls held the key. The sorrow-stricken girl would interrogate those walls, gazing, too, at the heavy curtains, at the windows, at the furniture, as if she sought by the compulsion of her look to wring the truth from these silent witnesses.

But this morning the grim death-chamber was not empty. A man of about forty years of age, tall and dignified, was standing on the hearth-rug, gravely surveying the spot where, just a week before, the old Baron Luxmore had been mysteriously stricken down. Lena started at sight of him.

"Lord Mountstuart!" she exclaimed, and a wave of crimson overspread her pallid face.

The stranger came towards her, holding out his hand.

"I have come to see if I can help you," he said, almost tenderly. "I arrived last evening, spent the night at the inn, and came round here half an hour ago. Was it too early for a visit? I have seen Mrs. Vayne, and she left me in the drawing-room, saying

she was going to tell you of my arrival. Meanwhile, I came in here. I wanted to see the room where—"

He broke off, and took both her hands in his.

"My poor girl!" he murmured, with deep pity in his voice. "My poor Lena!"

"Ah, no, not that!" cried Lena, shrinking back.

He understood that she recoiled at his use of her Christian name.

"Why may I not call you so?" he asked softly. "My love for you gives me the right, Lena. This is the room where I asked your father for his sanction of my love of you—do you remember?—and he gave it. But you came in and declared before us both that you did not love me—that you would never marry me. Lena, tell me, do you still feel like that towards me? Will you not now—now in your loneliness—accept my love, and give me the right to be near you, to comfort you, to protect you?"

The beautiful girl, white again as snow, drew her hands gently from his clasp.

"You forget, I am not lonely," she said. "I am betrothed to Mr. Wingrove, and he is here with me."

"He is here of necessity," rejoined Mountstuart gloomily. "Surely you do not mean to say that your engagement to him continues? Betrothed to a man who, for all you yet know, may be guilty of your father's blood? Oh, Lena, Lena! I had thought better of you."

"You do not know Mr. Wingrove," returned Lena bravely. "If you knew him you would not speak so. There is no possibility of his being guilty."

Mountstuart shook his head.

"Your faith in him is very noble," he said, with a sad smile, "but the circumstances are against him. Suspicion has been, and is still, upon him. And should you, Lena Luxmore, give yourself to a man upon whom suspicion has rested? More than that, your father disapproved of his suit to you, even dis-

missed him with anger. Has not your father's will become sacred to you now? Lena, hear me a moment. Your father's curse rests on Lieutenant Wingrove's love for you, his blessing rests upon mine. Can you, knowing that, turn from me? Here in this room, where the awful crime was committed, choose between Paul Wingrove and me. Think well. Ah!"

The door opened slowly, and Lieutenant Wingrove entered the room. Lord Mountstuart stopped. He did not know who the intruder was, but involuntarily he admired his sunny, handsome face, bright glance, and noble air. He was considerably astonished when Lena, recovering herself, calmly introduced him:

"Mr. Wingrove—Lord Mountstuart."

. . . . .

Michael Dred, before taking his seat in court that morning, publicly announced to the Coroner and the jury the flight—for thus he significantly termed the hasty departure—of Lord Luxmore. The news was received with murmurs of astonishment. The foreman of the jury inquired if any steps were being taken to follow the young peer. To this question Michael Dred replied that detectives were already on Lord Luxmore's track, but that up to the present hour no accurate information as to his whereabouts had been received. All that they knew was that he had been seen in London on the previous evening.

At this point the Coroner added that a warrant would immediately be issued for Lord Luxmore's arrest for contempt of court. This proceeding, he said, was fully justified by the circumstances of the case.

Beatrix Luxmore caught her breath sharply. In spite of her manifest illness and weakness, she had positively refused to be absent from the inquiry. She sat in her place as one who saw nothing and heard nothing. Only the nervous working of her

features and fingers showed that every word that was uttered, every movement and every glance of the various witnesses, sank deep into her consciousness. She thrilled visibly now, as she heard her sister's name called :

" Lena Luxmore."

Lena advanced slowly to the table. As she did so the door of the room opened, and there entered one who had not before been seen in that court—Lord Mountstuart. Paul Wingrove cast an anxious and perplexed glance upon him. Was he instinctively conscious of that other love that was now pressing its claims so boldly against his own ?

" When Lieutenant Wingrove left you, to go into the library on Tuesday afternoon last," said the Coroner meanwhile to the witness, " how long did you remain in the drawing-room ? "

" About five minutes," answered Lena. " Then I went upstairs."

" Leaving your sister and Mrs. Vayne together in the drawing-room ? "

" No. Only Mrs. Vayne. But I believe she came upstairs shortly afterwards."

" Where was your sister ? "

" I do not know. She had left the drawing-room shortly after Mr. Wingrove's arrival."

" What time was it when you went upstairs ? "

" About five-and-twenty minutes to six."

" Did you stay upstairs until the time when you went into the library and found your father lying dead ? "

" No." The witness hesitated a moment, and then went on reluctantly : " I knew that Mr. Wingrove was speaking with my father upon a subject which particularly concerned myself, and I began to feel that I ought to go and help him. I knew that my father had other intentions concerning me"—here a faint blush lent its beauty to her face, and the name of Lord

Mountstuart presented itself to the minds of all present in the room—"and I wanted to assure him that those intentions could never be realised, and to plead with him that in this matter, which concerned my whole life's happiness, I might have my own will. After a few moments of doubt, I went softly downstairs, intending to enter the library. That was about a quarter to six. But when I reached the library door I waited a moment instead of going in. The voices within were very loud ; my father's voice was one of extreme rage. From what I had heard I decided that it would be useless for me to attempt to move my father in his present state of anger, and, without even touching the door-handle, I went upstairs again. I then stayed upstairs until about half-past six—or it might have been twenty minutes to seven—when I came down and found my father lying dead."

Her voice broke. Her beautiful eyes were misty at last with tears.

"Your room is above the library, I believe?" pursued the Coroner.

"Yes."

"Could you, while in it, hear anything that happened downstairs, in the library or in the hall?"

"No. On that evening I heard absolutely nothing."

"Was anyone with you upstairs?"

"Not in my bedroom. But my maid was sewing in the dressing-room adjoining."

The Coroner bent forward a little.

"You say that from what you heard you decided not to go into the library. Could you distinguish any of the words that were being spoken inside?"

"Yes."

"What words did you hear?"

Lena raised her head and met the Coroner's look. A pained embarrassment was visible on her face. She glanced at Lord Mountstuart, and her look towards Paul was significant, questioning. Paul's clear

eyes answered her with sanction and encouragement, "Tell."

"The exact words, please," demanded the Coroner.

Lena straightened her slender figure.

"My father was accusing Mr. Wingrove of a desire to steal, as he expressed it, another man's daughter, for the sake of her money. His fury was so extreme, that he scarcely knew what he was saying." She paused again. It was hard to repeat before Lord Mountstuart the old baron's unjust and insulting expressions to the man she loved.

"Give us the exact words that he used," repeated the Coroner relentlessly.

"My father ordered Mr. Wingrove to leave the house," answered Lena slowly, and with a flash in her changeful eyes. "He said also these words: 'And lest your absence should not sufficiently protect me against you, understand that to-night I shall send for my lawyer and make a will stipulating that not one penny shall ever go to my daughter Lena if she should be fool enough and bad enough to marry you!'"

Grave silence succeeded this speech. Lord Mountstuart, immobile as a statue, fixed on Lena his longing, pitying gaze. But her own eyes turned from him to seek the clouded face of her sailor lover. In sign of her trust she smiled to him across the watching assembly. Her radiant beauty looked tragic as she stood there thus, between her passionate love for the living and her filial reverence for the dead.

"Then," came the sonorous voice of Michael Dred, breaking the silence, "the death of your father occurring within a quarter of an hour after he had uttered those words alone prevented him from carrying out an intention which would have been most unfortunate for the future prospects of both Mr. Wingrove and yourself?"

Lena merely bent her head. In loyalty to Paul she could have wished she had not repeated those

wild and condemning words, and thus given them to be dissected in cold blood by an intellect so pitiless as that of Michael Dred. But her refusal to speak would have inculpated Paul as much as the truth could do.

"Do you swear that immediately after hearing those words you went upstairs, and that you did not come down again until about half-past six, when you found your father dead?"

"I do swear it."

"During that time did you see anything of your sister Beatrix?"

"Nothing at all."

Lena then returned to her seat. Celestine Boutry was called.

This witness, a tall Parisienne, stated that she had been for five years lady's-maid at Luxmore Park. On the evening of the murder she was sitting sewing from five o'clock till half-past six in the dressing-room adjoining Miss Luxmore's bedroom. She remembered Miss Luxmore coming upstairs at about half-past five. She seemed quiet and preoccupied.

The Coroner: "How did you notice that? Did Miss Luxmore go into the dressing-room to you?"

"Yes, sir. I was altering a dinner-dress for her—oh, such a delicious dress! *une robe charmante*—that she wanted to wear while monsieur the lieutenant was here. I was altering the bodice, and she took it into the bedroom to try on. She did not bring it back, and presently—at six o'clock—I heard her go downstairs."

"At six o'clock?" questioned the Coroner. "Not at a quarter to six?"

"I should say at six o'clock," affirmed the maid. "She was not downstairs very long. I went into the bedroom to fetch the bodice, and there it was, all flung down in a heap on the bed. Ah, messieurs, a confection so delicate that it is a thousand pities that

his lordship should have died so *mal apropos* as to prevent her from wearing it! And there she had flung it down anyhow. She hadn't tried it on. And presently she came up again very much agitated. I said, 'Mademoiselle, you are spoiling this beautiful thing.' But she did not even listen. Her face was deathly white, and she trembled all over."

"Did she say anything to you?"

"Nothing at all. She seemed too distressed to speak."

Lena, recalled, was asked to account for the agitation thus described by her maid.

"It was in consequence of the words I had overheard," she replied, adding in a lower voice, "They had meant the downfall of my hopes."

Low though her accents were, Lord Mountstuart caught them, and his face clouded.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RE-EXAMINATION OF PAUL WINGROVE.

PAUL WINGROVE was summoned for re-examination.

"Since your first evidence was taken," the Coroner said, "the case has undergone several transitions, and I must now inquire more fully into your movements on the evening of the murder. You entered the library, you said, at about half-past five?"

"Yes," answered Paul; "that was, as nearly as I remember, the exact time."

"Did you observe that one of the windows was partly open?"

"No. I did not notice."

"Did you hear any noise or movement outside the windows; or did you see anyone passing them?"

"I neither heard nor saw anything. For the greater part of the time my back was towards the window."

"Did you notice whether the curtains of that particular window were closed or drawn?"

"The curtains of all the windows were drawn back."

"Now, pay attention, Mr. Wingrove. Did you, while you were in the library, notice any movement, or anything whatever that might indicate that some person was secreted behind those window curtains?"

"Most certainly not," answered Paul Wingrove positively. "The curtains, as I have said, were drawn back, and they were also looped up with cords. No one could have stood behind any one of them without attracting my attention."

"Ah!" said the Coroner. Then, after a pause, he

added, "It was, I suppose, equally improbable that anyone was hiding under cover of the large centre table?"

"More than improbable—impossible!" declared Paul. "I could see under the table. There was no cloth upon it—simply the polished black oak."

"Then you can positively swear that there was no one in the room besides Lord Luxmore and yourself?"

"Positively."

"I think you said that the wineglass, when you saw it, was full. Is that so?"

"I simply said that it had a golden liquid in it," Paul explained. "As a matter of fact, it was not quite full. The liquid came to within about a quarter of an inch from the brim."

"You appear to have paid singular attention to the wineglass," quietly observed Michael Dred.

The Coroner proceeded:

"Did Lord Luxmore drink from the glass while you were in the room?"

"No. He raised the glass to his lips once, but put it down again without touching the contents."

"At one point of your interview with him, Lord Luxmore was standing with his back towards you, and you, yourself, as it appears, were standing within reaching distance of the wineglass. Now, did you, during those few moments, touch the glass? Remember, you are upon your oath."

"I did not," fearlessly answered Paul. "Neither then nor at any other time before or since did I ever touch it."

"It is not absolutely necessary to touch a glass in order to drop poison into it," satirically remarked Michael Dred. His remark evidently influenced the Coroner's next question.

"Do you swear, Lieutenant Wingrove, that you did not drop or pour, or by any other method, put

arsenic, or any other poison, into that glass of orange wine?"

"I swear that I did not."

The answer was spoken very quietly. But it had the convincing force of truth. No solemn appeal to the Eternal Judge could have wrung belief from the hearts of those present more than did that low, calm, firm denial. Michael Dred leaned back in his chair with his eyes half shut. The Coroner merely nodded.

"Let me ask you this," he said. "When you left the library, was that wineglass still on the small table beside the deceased's chair?"

"It was."

"When you left that room, did you immediately go and put on your overcoat, or did you go into the drawing-room without it?"

"I went into the drawing-room without it. I remained there about ten minutes."

"And then went down the corridor for your overcoat?"

"Yes."

"When you put it on, you, of course, put your hands in the side pockets?"

"No. I cannot recollect doing so. My cigar-case was in my inner breast pocket. I had left my gloves in my hat. I think I put a newspaper into one of the side pockets at Paddington Station, but, as I did not wish to read, I did not take it out again. I wore the coat all through the night, and did not take it off till I reached Plymouth. One of the seamen carried it down to the jetty early in the morning. When I got down the jetty stairs, there were three midshipmen sitting in the stern-sheets of the longboat. As they moved to give place to me, I folded up my overcoat and sat upon it. I remember now that as I did so I heard something crunch or break. I have now no doubt that it was the bowl of the wineglass. One of the young gentlemen asked if I had not smashed

something. But, as the boat was then being shoved off, I took no more notice of the matter. I simply thought and said, 'Oh, I suppose it's my pipe I've broken.'"

Lena Luxmore drew a deep breath of satisfaction. It was evident that Paul's straightforward words and manly bearing had created a strong current of feeling in his favour. Even Mountstuart appeared to waver in his dislike of his young rival. Mrs. Vayne moved restlessly, as if she found her seat uncomfortable.

"Then you did not feel in the side pockets at all from the time that you left this house until the following morning?"

"No. And not even on the following morning. My servant put away the coat in my cabin, and when I was summoned back by Mr. Dred's telegram, I came here wearing another overcoat—a lighter one."

"Whilst you were waiting alone in the drawing-room, you heard a door open and close. Can you say definitely what door that was?"

"Yes, it was the library door."

"You are certain of that?" insisted the Coroner. "You said in your former evidence that you were not certain."

"I am quite certain," answered Paul. "Yesterday, during an interval of these proceedings, I went into the drawing-room and asked Mrs. Vayne to go out into the corridor and open and close all the doors in turn. She refused, happening to be busy, but Miss Luxmore did so, and by a peculiar click as the handle was turned I recognised the same sound that I had heard while waiting on the night of the crime. It was the library door."

Mrs. Vayne sat upright as if about to speak. But she said nothing.

"At what time, as nearly as you can estimate, did that mysterious door-opening occur?"

"At about three minutes to six."

"You heard another sound—the sound of someone moving in the adjoining conservatory; was that before or after you heard the library door open?"

"It was two or three minutes before I heard the door opened."

"Now, did you, while you were still in the house, hear other sounds in the direction of the library—any cry of pain, any noise as of a struggle, or any sound whatever which, upon mature recollection, you could take to indicate that something was going wrong in the library?"

"I cannot say that I heard anything of the kind."

The Coroner referred to the written evidence in his notebook, turning over page after page of his close writing. No further question seemed to suggest itself. He turned to Michael Dred, and the two conferred together in subdued tones. At length the Coroner looked up at the witness.

"That will be all I shall require of you at present," he said, nodding almost kindly. "Now we will hear the evidence of Mrs. Vayne."

That lady looked round, ill-pleased. She had been on the point of quitting the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

MRS. VAYNE.

BEFORE any questions were put to Mrs. Vayne, Paul Wingrove said :

"May I be allowed to rejoin my ship? My examination is to take place this week, and my promotion depends upon my being present."

"I am sorry I cannot give you permission to leave," replied the Coroner, looking at the handsome young officer with genuine regret. "You must wait until the jury have given their verdict."

Paul thanked the Coroner, and retired to his seat. He felt himself to be practically cleared from suspicion in the eyes of the court. Lena thought so, too, for her eyes were bright, and there was a smile upon her lips.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Vayne awaited her examination. She looked particularly ill-humoured. There were lines on her handsome face, and she bore herself with a haughty dignity that was not wholly free from sullenness.

She was first questioned as to her meeting with Reginald Luxmore on the Tuesday afternoon. She stated that their conversation had already been correctly detailed in Mr. Reginald's evidence, and that she could only corroborate what he had said. She described Mr. Reginald as having looked very haggard and worried. He had been particularly anxious to know if his uncle was likely to be in the house after dusk.

"Did he make that inquiry as though he wished Lord Luxmore to be out of the way that evening?"

"I can hardly say," replied Mrs. Vayne. "But, as he had come down with the intention of, as he said, 'having it out with his lordship,' I imagined it was his wish that he might find his uncle at home. I did not then suppose, however, that the young gentleman could have an appointment with anyone else."

"Had you, then, no knowledge of the fact that there existed a more than usual affection between Mr. Reginald and his cousin Beatrix?"

"I was aware that such an affection existed—particularly upon the side of the young lady," replied Mrs. Vayne, with a slightly jarring laugh. "I knew that they exchanged letters with each other. I did not, however, believe that it was anything more than a harmless flirtation. Lord Luxmore had asked me to discourage his nephew's visits, and, as far as I thought necessary, I did so. But girls are so cunning. They always outwit one."

"Were you in the confidence of the late Lord Luxmore?"

"Oh, entirely so."

Lena's brows contracted, as if with slight displeasure.

"Were you always on good terms with Lord Luxmore?"

"On perfectly good terms."

"That is not true," exclaimed Beatrix from her seat.

Mrs. Vayne apparently disdained to notice the interruption. Michael Dred smiled. The Coroner, with a reproving glance in Beatrix's direction, continued:

"When was it that you first heard of Lord Luxmore's intended marriage?"

"About a fortnight ago."

"How did you hear it? From his lordship's own lips?"

"Well, no," said Mrs. Vayne a little confusedly. "From rumour, I think."

"Pardon me," put in Michael Dred. "I think you are mistaken. I believe you discovered it from reading his lordship's private letters. Is not that so?"

Mrs. Vayne did not answer, but her florid face was crimson from her chin to the roots of her hair.

"The marriage would of course have affected your own position in the family?" observed the Coroner.

Mrs. Vayne threw her head slightly back.

"That," she said, "would have depended largely upon the disposition of the new Lady Luxmore. I might not have felt disposed to live in the same house with her."

Again Michael Dred smiled, But the smile passed unobserved by Mrs. Vayne, who never once turned her eyes upon the detective's face. The Coroner referred to his note-book and then asked:

"On the day of the murder, where were you at the time of Lieutenant Wingrove's arrival at the house?"

"I had just returned from my walk, and was in my own room." She waited a moment, then hurried on glibly: "I came downstairs at a little before half-past five, when the butler told me that Mr. Wingrove had arrived and wished to see Lord Luxmore."

"Are you sure you have told us correctly the time at which you came downstairs?" interposed Michael Dred.

Still without meeting his eye, Mrs. Vayne answered, "Yes, I saw the time by the clock on the mantelpiece in my room."

"When you came down, had the butler already taken in the glass of orange wine to the library?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw it on the library table when I looked in to see if his lordship was awake. I should not

have noticed it but that while I stood at the door Lord Luxmore took up the glass and drank from it."

"Was that immediately after the butler had spoken to you?"

"Yes. I merely looked into the library, told his lordship that Mr. Wingrove was waiting to see him, and then went at once into the drawing-room."

"Now, Mrs. Vayne," said the Coroner, leaning forward and speaking somewhat sternly, "do you swear that you did not go downstairs that afternoon between the time of your return from your walk and the final occasion when you looked into the library and found Lord Luxmore awake?"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Vayne, "am I not to be believed?"

"Answer the question, please. Did you or did you not come downstairs at about five o'clock?"

"I did not," asserted Mrs. Vayne.

"And yet one of the housemaids believes that she saw you. How do you explain that?"

"She must have made a mistake," said Mrs. Vayne airily. "It was probably one of the girls that she saw."

The exclamation raised a smile. It was hardly likely that anyone would mistake Lena or Beatrix Luxmore for the portly, florid, and middle-aged Mrs. Vayne.

The Coroner looked dissatisfied. After a pause, he proceeded with the examination:

"When Mr. Wingrove had gone into the library, did you remain with Miss Luxmore in the drawing-room?"

"Yes, for a few moments. Then I followed her upstairs."

"During this time, did you see Miss Beatrix?"

"No, but I heard her moving in her room. I afterwards heard her open her room door and go downstairs."

"At what time was that?"

"I should say it was about a quarter to six. It was just a little time before Miss Luxmore went down."

"And at what time did you yourself go downstairs?"

Mrs. Vayne turned up her eyes, as if the ceiling might have a suggestion to offer her.

"Ten minutes past six," she answered at last.

"Was it not earlier?" insisted the Coroner. "Lieutenant Wingrove has told us that you were in this room when he left the house. And that was about five minutes past six."

"I didn't move about that evening with my watch in my hand," retorted Mrs. Vayne.

"Assuming that you were in this room when Mr. Wingrove left the house, you must have passed through the hall while he and the butler were talking together. Did you see them?"

"I did not come here through the hall," said the witness sharply. "I came by the inner entrance, the one communicating with the servants' hall." And she pointed to a small door at the end of the room.

"Do you often enter this room by that way?" sarcastically inquired Michael Dred.

"Not often," replied the witness, "but occasionally."

"Did any of the servants see you?"

"No."

"It is very strange," remarked Michael Dred, "that every member of the family moved about this house on that evening without being either encountered or observed. It cannot have happened so by accident."

The Coroner's words followed his.

"What were you doing here in the dining-room?"

"I first lighted the lamp on the sideboard. Then I went out into the hall, and saw to my surprise that it was still in darkness. I rang the butler's bell, and then, without seeing him, went upstairs to dress for

dinner. I was called down again by Miss Luxmore's cry of alarm."

"So," said Michael Dred quietly, "at a few minutes past six you came downstairs, and reached this room by a roundabout way, with no other object than the trivial one of lighting the lamp on this sideboard—a matter, by the bye, which was not your duty, but the butler's!"

A curious little wave of surprise and discomfiture passed across Mrs. Vayne's face. Then she grew a little pale.

"Exactly," she said.

"Did you not, before taking that circuitous route to the dining-room, open the library door?"

"What would have been my object in doing that?" inquired Mrs. Vayne scornfully.

"You know that best," rejoined Michael Dred. "Did you open the library door?"

"No."

"And yet you must, according to the evidence, have passed it just about the time when Lieutenant Wingrove declares he heard it open. Did you see or hear anyone loitering about there?"

"I saw no one and heard nothing," replied Mrs. Vayne, in an irritated voice.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Vayne; is that a scratch that I see on your right hand, just below the thumb? I am very long-sighted, but my eyes may be deceiving me."

Instantly, and as if instinctively, Mrs. Vayne had hidden her hand behind one of the folds of her dress. Now, however, she drew it forth again. It shook a little, possibly from her excitement. She spoke coolly, but the florid patches on her face stood out prominently from the blanched skin around them. Michael Dred awaited her answer. For the first time she met his gaze. Her black eyes had defiance and malignity in them. Nevertheless, they cringed before his scrutiny.

"I scratched my hand with the pin of my brooch, about a fortnight ago," she said. She smiled with a sort of ghastly coquetry as she added, "My skin takes a long time to heal. It is so delicate."

"You are sure that it was the pin of your brooch that caused the scratch?" pursued the suave voice of the detective. "Not a piece of broken glass?"

"What do you mean?" cried Mrs. Vayne, starting back and speaking in a tone of horrified indignation. "Do you mean to suggest that I—*I*—had anything to do with Lord Luxmore's death?"

"I suggest nothing," rejoined the detective. "I am simply trying to get at the facts. Did you, on the day of Lord Luxmore's death, touch or drop any poison into the glass of cordial that was taken to him in the library?"

"I did not; certainly I did not," answered Mrs. Vayne, speaking very rapidly.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A VISTA OF DEEPER HORROR.

'I ASSUME," said the Coroner, his dry, matter-of-fact voice breaking the uncertain echo of Mrs. Vayne's quick speech—"I assume that you occasionally ministered to Lord Luxmore's personal wants. Did you, on Tuesday last, or upon any other day during the last week of his life, give him any of the medicine that had been prescribed for him?"

"No. The butler had told me that the medicine seemed to do more harm than good. I was, therefore, very much taken aback when, on the Tuesday morning, Beatrix Luxmore told me that, as Bell had neglected the doctor's instructions, she herself had just given her father his usual dose of medicine."

"There!" exclaimed the piping voice of Edward Bell. For days the butler had not spoken, but now he started suddenly to his feet, his small eyes twinkling, and his scanty locks standing out stiffly around his head. "There! I told you 'twas the med'sin as done it. I thought as it would come out at last."

"Silence!" said the Coroner; and then added to the witness, "Why did you not mention this when you were questioned about the medicine last week?"

Mrs. Vayne shrugged her ample shoulders.

"It did not then occur to me that Beatrix could have any evil motive in giving her father his tonic," she said.

Beatrix Luxmore was then questioned on this point. She did not deny that she had administered

the medicine to her father on the Tuesday morning. She had poured the dose out of a half-full bottle, and had taken it into the study under Mrs. Vayne's eyes. Mrs. Vayne and Lord Luxmore were then arguing very hotly. She did not remain in the study, but she gathered that the subject of their dispute was Lady Ormidale.

Michael Dred closed his lips tightly.

Mrs. Vayne, who had seated herself for a moment, drew her black brows together till they met. Her foot tapped the carpet as the Coroner put his next question:

"At what time was this?"

"Eleven o'clock."

Beatrix glided back to her seat. She had given her answers in a dull, level voice, as though all things—even life and death—were indifferent to her now. Mrs. Vayne rose to answer further questions.

"Is it a fact that you quarrelled with Lord Luxmore on the morning of the day of his death?" asked the Coroner gravely.

"We had a little dispute," admitted the witness. "It can scarcely be called a quarrel."

"On the subject of his lordship's intended marriage?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Vayne, with evident reluctance.

"Tell us what was said."

"I prefer not to do so," objected Mrs. Vayne frigidly. The stubborn set of her jaw showed that she intended to adhere to her refusal. The Coroner repeated his question, adding to it a warning; but question and warning were alike fruitless.

"I may as well say that there was nothing unusual in my disagreeing with Lord Luxmore," volunteered Mrs. Vayne vindictively. "Everybody in the house disagreed with him, his daughters most of all. He was always complaining of what he called his numerous enemies. He complained that his daughters were

recklessly extravagant and unpardonably flighty. He used to quarrel with them over meals—a course which, in my opinion, was only calculated to make them rebel. Beatrix was especially inclined to cross her father's will."

Even this statement did not rouse Beatrix from her stony apathy, nor bring back for an instant to her eyes the light that seemed to have fled from them for ever. Very different were the eyes of her sister. Indignation burned in them—indignation that this woman, who for fifteen years had lived with them and known their joys and sorrows, should thus cruelly betray the weaknesses of him who had been called so tragically to the tomb.

The Coroner laid his hand on the table before him with a decisive gesture. His eyes looked straight into Mrs. Vayne's.

"During the past few weeks, or at any previous time, has there, to your knowledge, been any arsenic brought into the house?"

"Not to my knowledge," replied Mrs. Vayne, shaking her head. "I don't even know what arsenic is like. I have heard of it, of course; but I have never seen any, either in this house or anywhere else."

"Have any poisonous drugs, other than arsenic, been brought into the house with your knowledge?"

Mrs. Vayne reflected for a moment. Then she answered, and there was a scintillation of malice in her full black eyes:

"I don't know the name of it, but there is a poisonous powder we have been getting from Paris. We couldn't get it at the local chemist's."

"What kind of a powder?"

"I don't know anything about it, except that it is white and heavy."

"How could you get it from Paris, or anywhere else, if you did not know its name?"

"Celestine Boutry, the maid, writes for it."

"What was the powder got for?"

"For toilet purposes, I believe. Not for me—for Beatrix Luxmore. I daresay you will find some of it now, if you look, in one of the boxes on her toilette-table."

On a search being made, Mrs. Vayne's statement was found to be true. A quantity of pure arsenic was discovered in a puff-box on the dressing-table in Beatrix's room. On being severely cross-questioned concerning it, Beatrix merely answered wearily:

"I know nothing about it beyond that Celestine Boutry got it, saying it was good for the skin. I have only used it once. I did not like it. Lena never used it at all. I had forgotten that it was there."

Nothing more than this could be elicited from her. She spoke as a statue might speak—icily, slowly, indifferently. Then she went back to her chair, and sat there as one dead to the world about her.

Celestine Boutry was then examined at length, but supplied no new information, except the address of the chemist in Paris from whom she had obtained the powder.

Several others of the servants were examined with no further result. Then there ensued a pause in court. The Coroner's face was pale and chagrined. He summoned one of the constables in waiting.

"Ask Dr. Mortimer to come in," he said.

An indefinable thrill ran through the persons composing that assembly. It was understood that the great specialist had recently arrived, and had been taking refreshment in the study. What would he have to say? everyone wondered. Would he throw any new light upon the baffling mystery, which even now, upon the very eve of the Coroner's summing-up, was no nearer solution than it had been at the beginning of the inquiry?

Every eye was turned upon Dr. Mortimer as he entered the room. And there was eagerness in every

eye—eager interest, in some cases not unmixed with apprehension. Dr. Hale raised himself more upright in his seat. The faces of Lena and Paul were set with expectancy. Mrs. Vayne looked curious, but was still excited after her examination. Michael Dred's fingers were tapping his knee—a sign of unusual restlessness in so quiet a man. Only Beatrix and Lord Mountstuart appeared unmoved. But Mountstuart's calm was merely the calm of one who waits and watches gravely ; whereas Beatrix's calm was like the awful immobility of the dead.

" I have completed the analysis of the reserved portion of the deceased nobleman's left lung," began the low, firm voice of the specialist. " But, before commencing my report concerning it, I will speak of the fragments of glass which were handed to me this morning for examination—the remains of a wineglass in which it is suspected that there was arsenic. I may state briefly that I cannot detect on these portions of glass any trace whatever of arsenious acid or of any other poison."

" Hear, hear ! " said the butler, in evident relief.

Mrs. Vayne darted a triumphant look at Michael Dred, and then bestowed a gratified smile on the company in general.

" Of course," added the physician, " it is possible that the glass may have been washed or wiped out after its removal from the library."

" That is more than probable," said Michael Dred emphatically.

" With regard to the lung," pursued Dr. Mortimer, " I have a most grave announcement to make. In my former evidence I could only state that the organ was discoloured and abraided by the presence of some foreign irritant matter. I have now discovered that that foreign matter was a most virulent and deadly Oriental alkaloid poison."

He paused, looking over his spectacles at the pale

face of the Coroner. There was an intense hush in the room. The jurymen sat awed and motionless, with their faces all turned towards the speaker. He continued, still in that low tone of absolute knowledge and conviction:

"This poison is one of the rarest and deadliest known to science, and is, indeed, only accurately known and prepared by the occult chemists of India and Ceylon. It is called by them *bikh*. Its fearful potency is such that so small a quantity as one-fiftieth of a grain is capable of producing fatal results. Owing to its terrible swiftness of action and the smallness of the quantity required to cause instantaneous death, its detection is extremely difficult. I may say that, had I been unaided in my analytical examination, I could not by any possibility have discovered its presence. But I have had the assistance, not only of the Government analyst, but also of three of the most eminent toxicologists now living in Europe—all three of whom are prepared to come forward, if required, and corroborate my present statement."

Again he paused. Still the deep hush continued. Again he went on:

"The manner in which this poison was introduced into the body of the deceased remains a profound mystery. It is unfortunate that, preoccupied as we were with the theory that the deceased had met his death by means of arsenic, my colleague and I, at the time of the *post-mortem* examination, did not give such close attention to the appearance of the surface of the body as would be necessary to detect any minute trace of the method by which this poison had been administered. Furthermore, it is possible that many important indications may have been obliterated by our removal of the part of the lung necessary for examination. The drug *bikh* may be taken in three ways—by incision, through the skin, or insertion into a wound; by inhalation through the throat or nostrils;

or by swallowing in the ordinary way. Had this poison been swallowed by Lord Luxmore, its traces would have been found in the stomach or in some part of the alimentary canal. The actual method of administering the drug might possibly have been discovered if the body had been examined with this object in view, immediately after death. There is one important fact, however, which I am able to state most positively, and that is, that however it may have been taken, the poison could not have been in Lord Luxmore's body more than *four seconds before the occurrence of death.*"

The words came like a thunderbolt upon the assembly. Every man and woman present stood or sat with whitening cheeks and lips, stricken, transfixed with a darker, deeper horror, a more bewildering consternation than any yet felt within that accursed house. Lena sat with her pale lips apart, and her eyes dilated and wild. Beatrix stirred at last, but only to moan. Michael Dred's face had a desperate look upon it. Perhaps he felt that, for once, even his great skill in the detection of crime had been useless as the blind and wayward guessing of a little child.

The faces of the Coroner and the jury expressed the same thought that moved Paul Wingrove to murmur in his horror:

"Only God can ever know the truth of this!"

At last Dr. Hale asked permission to put a question to the eminent physician. The permission being granted, he asked:

"Are we then to assume, Dr. Mortimer, that you discredit entirely the theory that the death of Lord Luxmore was caused by arsenic?"

"Entirely," answered Dr. Mortimer emphatically. "At the same time we have established beyond a doubt that arsenic was administered to the deceased in such a quantity and in such a manner as reveal beyond question an intent to kill. My own theory is that the

murderer, ignorant of the fact that his or her victim had been partly steeled against the effects of arsenical poison by small doses taken medicinally, endeavoured to achieve his purpose by means of that poison, until, finding his attempts unaccountably frustrated, he became desperate, and chose a method that nothing could frustrate—a method unequalled for its appalling swiftness, suddenness, and subtlety, and also, I am sorry to say, for its infinitesimal risk of discovery. If Lord Luxmore had been a poor man—by this I mean, if his family had not been wealthy enough to spend large sums of money on this investigation, the immediate cause of his death would in all probability never have been revealed. I wish," added Dr. Mortimer warmly, "that it were possible for the science which has discovered the method of the crime to discover also its perpetrator!"

He moved away from the table. Formally, then, the Coroner adjourned the inquest until after luncheon. Silently, shudderingly, the awe-stricken company passed out of the dining-room. Beatrix entered the library. No one followed her. She glanced around the crime-polluted room, then buried her face in her hands.

"I wish I could die! Oh, I wish I could die!" she moaned.

Meanwhile, in the hall, Mrs. Vayne had edged up to Paul Wingrove, and was saying to him in a low, acrid voice:

"It's a pity you confessed to having studied chemistry in Ceylon—is it not, Mr. Wingrove?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

NEARING THE CRISIS.

THE unexpected and startling announcement made by Dr. Mortimer flashed with electric swiftness through the Luxmore household. The servants gathered together with pale faces and talked in whispers. It was only a week since the awful crime had occurred, and who knew but that the murderer, with his fiendish and resistless drug, was still in their midst and might claim a second victim?

Suspicion was in every eye. The oppressive horror which the passing days had already begun to lift from the house, settled on it again even more thickly and darkly than before. A shuddering excitement pervaded the air. Beyond the avenue gates the usual daily crowd of idlers was hourly increasing. The public knew that the inquest was on the point of closing, and waited in the dim hope of hearing the verdict. The majority were of opinion that it would be given against the new Lord Luxmore.

"He 'aven't run away fer nothin'," one of their number sagaciously observed. "'E'll just have to be fetched back and tried by the 'Ouse of Peers."

Among the members of the Luxmore family the agitation was intense. Not yet had the colour—driven away by the report of the terrible Asiatic poison—returned to any face save Mrs. Vayne's. She alone seemed to feel nothing of the general horror. In place of it, another feeling—that of consternation—appeared to oppress her. Since she had

heard the specialist's evidence her manner had entirely changed. Her usual aggressive brusqueness had given place to a slow bewilderment. She moved about aimlessly with an expression of blank wonder in her eyes. Now and again she might have been overheard repeating to herself with slow head-shakings:

"It is very odd—the oddest thing in the world! It is quite inexplicable!"

Once she added: "Who can it be that hated him so? Bah! I believe those specialists are mostly fools."

In the course of her restless wanderings she passed by the library door. Stopping, she stood for a moment as if in hesitation, while the blood ebbed from her face, leaving it very pale. At last she turned the handle of the door, and went slowly and silently into the crime-haunted room. As her eyes travelled apprehensively around it, she drew back with a start. There, upon the leather-covered couch, lay Beatrix Luxmore, with her head thrown back, and her gleaming hair loose and dishevelled. She was in a dead faint.

Mrs. Vayne drew nearer. An open letter lay by the girl's side, having apparently dropped from her fingers as she sank into unconsciousness. Mrs. Vayne looked at the letter. There was very little writing upon it, and that little was to her absolutely undecipherable. The words were incoherently jumbled, and apparently meaningless. It was evidently a cryptographic letter, written in a disguised hand.

"This, too—what can be the meaning of it?" said Mrs. Vayne to herself in a peculiar tone of wonder. Putting the letter down again, she glided noiselessly from the room and rang the bell for Celestine Boutry.

Meanwhile, in the morning-room, Lena Luxmore stood on the hearthrug, with her elbows resting on the mantelpiece, and her face hidden between her

small white hands. Her tall figure, in its clinging folds of black, seemed every day to grow more slender. Even those soft hands were becoming too delicate, too transparent, too fragile. Paul thought this as he stood now by her side.

He was alone with her. Lord Mountstuart had just left the room. No one had lingered over luncheon. With so dark a horror oppressing them they could not eat.

"Lena," appealed Paul, in a deep voice of pain, "why is that man here—Mountstuart, I mean? Has he come to take you from me?"

The agitated girl lifted her head, and turned on him her beautiful, troubled eyes.

"He has come as a friend, Paul, to see if he can help us—Beatrix and me. Heaven knows, we need a friend!"

"Lena!" The cry came bitterly from the young sailor's jealous, yearning heart. "Have you not me for a friend? Oh, my darling! I would give my life here and now to spare you another moment of this anguish and suspense."

"I know—I know," she murmured, turning towards him. For one brief instant she was clasped in his arms, strained to his aching heart. And yet she glanced about the room with a swift searching glance of terror. "Oh, Paul, that poison! Is there a fiend lurking in this house? or was it a spirit, that came unseen, unheard? Think—*four seconds before death!* The mystery of it is paralysing. It chills one's blood. Paul, you learned about this drug. Is it all that they say?"

"It is a drug that none but a fiend could use," replied Paul, clenching his strong young hands. "The venom of it races through the blood, and the victim dies as though lightning had killed him. Strange! strange! that I should come back from India to be confronted here with this!"

"But the verdict, Paul—can you think what it will be?"

"It may be against me," replied the young officer bitterly. "This morning I thought I was cleared from suspicion. I thought I should soon be able to go to you and say, 'Darling, the world believes in me, and knows me worthy of your trust.' But now it is all dark again." He put his hand to his brow. "Lena, I still think it is Lord Luxmore, your cousin. He must be followed and found."

"He shall be found," said a voice from the threshold.

They turned and saw Michael Dred. He entered the room. His sallow face was more lined than usual, but his keen eyes were feverishly dry and bright. He walked to the fire as if he were cold, and began to warm his hands before the flaming logs.

At his coming, silence fell on the lovers, and in that silence the rolling of carriage wheels was audible on the gravel of the drive outside. While still Paul and Lena listened, the rustle of skirts was heard approaching along the corridor, and Lady Ormidale, splendidly dressed in black and lavender, appeared in the doorway. Lena, astonished, drew back, and the two women, somewhat alike in the style of their beauty, surveyed each other for a moment in silence. Paul, glancing towards the place where Michael Dred had been, was surprised to see that the detective was there no longer. He had disappeared from the room.

Half an hour later, the court was re-opened and the summing-up began.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SIFTING THE EVIDENCE.

"GENTLEMEN of the Jury," began the Coroner. His face was pale and his manner agitated, as if with a sense of his responsibility. "I need not tell you that the duty I now undertake is one of the gravest I have ever in my life been called upon to perform. For many successive days we have been assembled here to inquire into the cause of the death of Baron Luxmore. The moment is now impending when the result of our inquiry must be made known to the world. But before you can give your verdict, the duty devolves upon me to sift, as far as is possible, the mass of evidence that we have gathered together, and to set forth as briefly and clearly as I can those facts which most throw light upon the darkness of this unparalleled mystery.

"First we will consider the precise manner of Lord Luxmore's death. That his death was not the result of natural causes has been abundantly proved. That it was brought about, and deliberately brought about, by another hand than his own, there cannot, I will venture to say, be the slightest room for doubt. From the very beginning of these proceedings, it has been manifest that the deceased was murdered. This being so, we have to consider the probable motive which led to the perpetration of so subtle and dastardly a crime. Finally, we must seek the actual method by which that crime was committed, and conclusively

determine and declare what person or persons did commit it.

"On the morning of the day of his death—the fifteenth of the present month—Lord Luxmore was in his usual condition of health. He was not an old man. He suffered from no organic disease. From the fact that he intended very shortly to contract a second marriage, we may infer that he certainly hoped and probably expected to enjoy a prolonged life. He was wealthy, of high position, and his financial affairs were under no embarrassment. But that he complained of the ingratitude of his nephew and the presumed extravagance of his family, there is no reason to surmise that he was unhappy. Indeed, the trivial and domestic character of the matters he was known to worry over seems to prove an utter absence of any serious trouble. There is therefore no reason to suppose that the thought of taking his own life ever entered his mind. All the facts and circumstances of the case combine to warn us that the theory of suicide must be dismissed altogether from our deliberations."

He paused. The jury nodded in silent acquiescence.

"This being so, let us set ourselves to consider the circumstances of the murder—since murder it undoubtedly was, and murder it must be called.

"On the morning of the fifteenth, Lord Luxmore was well enough to take his customary carriage exercise. At half-past five in the evening he was still perfectly well. At half-past six he was found dead. Assuming for the moment that the deadly Oriental poison, *bikh*, was the actual cause of death, and remembering the startling statement of Dr. Mortimer that this poison must have been administered not more than four seconds before the end came, we find the space of time during which the crime could have been committed narrowing down to very close limits.

"Now, as to the immediate cause or causes of the death :

"There was no blood shed. There appears to have been no struggle. Neither did anyone hear any call for help or any groan of pain. Indeed, for silence, for appalling suddenness and cold subtlety, this crime must be considered unequalled. This swiftness and silence naturally suggest that poison was the means employed, and the medical evidence incontestably proves that such was actually the case. There is no doubt whatever that Lord Luxmore died from the effects of poison wilfully administered.

"But one of the strangest of the strange circumstances connected with this case is that two poisons—and poisons of the most opposite nature—appear to have been employed. Until this morning we had carried on our investigations under the belief that arsenic alone was the cause of Lord Luxmore's death. But this morning a statement was made which, I think I may say, at once astonished and appalled us. I allude to the evidence of Dr. Mortimer with regard to the poison *bikh*. Let me remind you, gentlemen, that this evidence, given by one of the most eminent of living specialists, comes to us with an authority that commands our entire faith. Whether or not you will accept the theory propounded by Dr. Mortimer that this most deadly poison, *bikh*, was given as a last terrible resource by the same hand which had previously administered the arsenic, I leave it to you to decide. For my own part, I am hardly inclined to think that any intending murderer, having knowledge and possession of the swift and secret Eastern poison, would dally about with the arsenic in the almost clumsy manner revealed by the circumstances of this case. It is as though an engineer, wishing to blow up a fortress, had employed simple gunpowder when nitro-glycerine was at his hand. The fact remains that both poisons—the slow and the quick—were

certainly administered. We will now proceed to survey the possible and probable methods of their administration.

"To begin with, there is the circumstance that a small quantity of arsenious acid had, for some time past, been regularly given to the deceased in the tonic prescribed by his medical adviser. This circumstance must be remembered as showing that Lord Luxmore was to a certain extent inured to arsenic, which fact certainly diminished, if even it did not entirely counteract, the effect of the large doses of the poison that were afterwards maliciously administered to him.

"The minute quantity of arsenic which should properly have been given in the medicine cannot account for the large quantity discovered in the digestive organs after death. A great deal of arsenic seems to have been brought into this house, and at least four members of the household were aware of this fact. Supposing that any one of those four persons desired, by means of this poison, to compass Lord Luxmore's death, his or her method would naturally be to introduce the poison into some food or drink that would be partaken of by Lord Luxmore alone. Both the medicine and the daily glass of orange cordial afforded opportunity for this. Evidence points to the conclusion that both these means were adopted.

"It has not, I may remind you, been definitely proved that there was poison in the orange cordial which the deceased drank on the afternoon of his death. But the circumstantial evidence on this point is overwhelming. The mere fact of the glass having been removed in so mysterious and surreptitious a way sufficiently proves that had it been left in the room it must have betrayed something of the nature and method of the crime. The fact of the two flies being found dead where the drop of liquid had dried

adds weight to this theory. I think it safe, therefore, to assume that the orange cordial was charged with poison, and that the poison was introduced into it subsequently to its being poured from the bottle.

"On the other hand it is incontestable that a quantity of arsenic sufficient to cause death was introduced into one or more of the medicine bottles, and it has been elicited, after considerable trouble and contradiction, that a dose of that medicine was administered to the deceased on the day of his death. Now, it is most strange that, if Lord Luxmore had been for some time, or even for two or three days, taking any of the medicine thus highly charged with arsenic, he had not before exhibited symptoms of poisoning. I must say that it appears to me possible that the arsenic was introduced into the medicine bottles after the deceased's death, probably with a view to misleading these investigations.

"It must also be considered that if, indeed, arsenic was administered in the medicine with intent to murder, it must have been administered by some person who had frequent access to the bottles—that is to say, either by the doctor or by a member of the family or household. This theory would necessarily exclude from implication at least two of the persons upon whom suspicion has hitherto most gravely rested.

"It is conceivable that the intending murderer, being ignorant of the fact that arsenic had frequently been taken by Lord Luxmore as a tonic, at first planned to achieve his or her terrible purpose by administering poison in the medicine, and that at last, surprised that the malignant doses produced no apparent effect, he or she ingeniously concluded that some ingredient in the medicine counteracted the deadly drug, and resolved in consequence to transfer the poison to the orange wine. Now, here you will recognise the important fact that at the time when

this change of process was adopted, some person *gave instructions for the administering of the medicine to be discontinued.*

"You must also bear in mind that the butler, who had most opportunity for tampering with the wine, was most anxious that the medicine should be thrown away. In fact, to use his own words, he actually took it upon himself to 'chuck it out of the window.'

"As I have already drawn attention to Dr. Hale as a person who had free access to the medicine bottles, it is just that I should remind you that during the afternoon, when the poison must have been introduced into the orange wine, Dr. Hale was not in this house.

"Now, again, it is further conceivable that the person administering the arsenic, finding that the dose given in the orange cordial failed in the speediness of its action, or, perhaps, apprehensive that it would fail, or, it may be, even apprehensive of detection from the excruciating agony, which, under normal conditions, that extra dose of arsenic would inevitably produce, resorted as a final extremity to the venomous Eastern poison which was unquestionably the immediate and actual cause of death.

"The poison, *bikh*, is, I understand, a species of aconite, skilfully extracted and prepared from the Indian wolfsbane, or monkshood. Its fearful potency has been already commented upon by Dr. Mortimer. It is worthy of note that, while arsenious acid, in its various forms, is obtainable with comparative ease, the other poison is so rare, that in its most virulent form it may be said to be practically unobtainable in England, and must, therefore, have been procured from abroad.

"Unfortunately, there are now no means by which we can discover the exact method by which this terrible poison was introduced into Lord Luxmore's body. All that we know is that it caused in-

stantaneous death. It remains for us to discover what person gained access to Lord Luxmore at the approximate time of the committal of the fatal act.

"Now, that approximate time, as far as the evidence shows, covers a space of half an hour—the half-hour between a quarter to six and a quarter past six. During that time, the lower rooms of the house were mysteriously kept in darkness. It is singular that this unprecedented delay in lighting the lamps should have occurred on this particular evening. It is also a very remarkable circumstance that, during this suspicious half-hour of which I have spoken, several persons, all of them witnesses in this case, moved about near the scene of the crime, within a few minutes—I might almost say within a few seconds—of each other, yet each unseen by the others, and each, therefore, with the story of his movements practically uncorroborated. I cannot refrain from remarking that the general state of affairs within the walls of this house was such as is not often to be found in any household, whether of high or low station. The family, indeed, appears to have been divided against itself; and one of the most distressing facts elicited in the course of this inquiry has been that the late nobleman was surrounded in his own home by persons, each one of whom may be said to have had a motive for desiring his death."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHO OPENED THE DOOR?

"In the face of the difficulties that confront us," continued the Coroner, "it is impossible for us to inquire into when the first dose of arsenic was administered. Presumably it was given in the medicine—possibly, also, some fortnight or three weeks before the actual tragedy occurred. We must confine ourselves to the movements of persons during the few hours immediately preceding Lord Luxmore's death, confident that, if we can succeed in tracing the individual who gave the last dose of arsenic, we shall have discovered the giver of the first, and the manipulator of the other venomous poison that so rapidly achieved its awful purpose.

"Let us review the position, motives, and evidence of those persons who were near the scene of the crime at or near the time of its perpetration. I will begin with the elder daughter of the deceased."

Lena started, and turned her blue-grey eyes upward in anxious inquiry. The whole assembly listened more intently as the Coroner proceeded:

"Miss Luxmore has stated in her evidence that at half-past six, or it might have been twenty minutes to seven, she went into the library and found her father lying dead. She immediately raised an alarm, and several members of the family and household rushed into the room. They found her kneeling beside her father's body.

"Now, very little attention has been given to this

fact, that Lena Luxmore was with her father's body when his death was made known. Miss Luxmore had overheard her father's last words to Mr. Wingrove, and, as you will remember, those last words were of a nature to cause her great disappointment and grief. She had heard her father angrily forbid Mr. Wingrove to enter the house again, and had heard him declare his intention of that night making a will in which she would be disinherited in the event of her marrying the man who had just been pleading for her hand. We know from the evidence of her maid that what she had overheard caused her great distress. She was, we have been told, extremely agitated. Gentlemen, I have no wish to impute anything sinister to Miss Luxmore, but I am bound by my office to point out to you that we have no evidence whatever, beyond her own uncorroborated statement, to show how long she had been in the library before she raised the alarm. She herself tells us that she entered the library between half-past six and twenty to seven; but we must remember that her estimate of time is not to be considered infallible, as her evidence with regard to the time of her first going downstairs has been contradicted by the maid Boutry. I am bound also to remind you that there have been numerous examples of criminals having endeavoured to avert suspicion from themselves by being the first to call attention to their crime. It is difficult to conceive it possible that a young girl could have obtained possession of, or had the diabolical nerve to employ, a poison so rare and virulent as *bikh*. It is significant, however, that this young girl's accepted lover had just returned from that one part of the world where this deadly preparation is compounded.

"As for the arsenic, the information supplied by both Mrs. Vayne and the French maid Boutry shows that this poison was accessible to Lena Luxmore as to anyone else of the family or household.

"Having set these matters before you, I feel it my duty to add that, of all in the family, Lena Luxmore appears to have been most in harmony with the deceased nobleman, her father. Furthermore, her bearing throughout this inquiry and the manner in which she has given her evidence have been singularly fearless and free from all suspicion of dissimulation."

Lena listened in absolute calm and immobility, with no sign of indignation on her pure and lovely face. But an uneasy thrill ran through some others of the witnesses. If the Coroner had dealt thus with the daughter of the house, how would he deal with those who from the very first had been clouded with the shadow of condemning circumstances?

"So far as we know," resumed the sharp, merciless voice, "Miss Luxmore was the first person to see her father dead. So far as we know, the last person to see him alive was Lieutenant Wingrove. Let us now consider the position in which this last-named witness stands in relation to the case."

Michael Dred made a movement of surprise. He had probably expected that Paul Wingrove would be left until the last, as befitted one against whom the scale of circumstances turned heavily. Paul himself had waited with his handsome head proudly raised and his frank blue eyes ready to meet undauntedly the searching glances that other eyes now darted frequently towards him. Lord Mountstuart quietly drew nearer to Lena and spoke to her in a low voice. Lady Ormidale's beauty and rich dress were conspicuous in the sombre room. Michael Dred kept his face studiously averted from where she sat.

"First, as to motive," pursued the Coroner. "Everything points to the fact that the murder of Lord Luxmore was a premeditated murder. It appears certain that the assassin must have entered the library with the deliberate intention of committing the crime. In any case, he must already have provided himself

with the means of committing it. Now it seems in the highest degree unlikely that Mr. Wingrove, coming straight from an interview with his betrothed, in buoyant spirits, as we have been told, and with no reason to fear that Lord Luxmore would reject his suit, should have taken into the library any poison or other means of causing the death of the man whose daughter he loved and hoped to marry. Indeed, in the matter of motive, Mr. Wingrove occupies a very curious position. He entered the library with apparently no reason whatever for designing or even wishing ill to the father of his betrothed. But while he was in the room, his position towards Lord Luxmore underwent a decided change, so that, during his last moments with the deceased peer his hot resentment may be said to constitute a stronger motive against him than can be set forth against any other person—save one—hitherto implicated in this case.

"We can never exactly know what took place during that interview in the library. It is possible, even, that Lord Luxmore used expressions which Mr. Wingrove does not care to repeat. It is rather hard to understand the deceased's violent outburst of rage against a young man who had, so far as we know, done nothing worse than honourably ask for the hand of his daughter in marriage. Mr. Wingrove is the son of a very high dignitary of the Church, and, as a naval officer, he has, although still so young, served his Queen and his country with honour and distinction. His record hitherto has been blameless, and it is difficult to believe that he in any way deserved the insults—for they can be called nothing else—which the late peer heaped upon him during that last unhappy scene.

"But I ask you, are we to suppose that this young officer carried poisons about with him as a Mexican desperado carries his pistol, to be used on the slightest provocation, and that, incensed beyond all self-control

by the stinging words that had been addressed to him, he dropped arsenic into the glass of cordial near which, by his own admission, he stood? If you believe that this was so, then you must also ask yourselves the question, How could he also have put arsenic into the medicine bottles? It seems manifestly impossible that he could have done so. Absent as he had been for a considerable time, he could not even have known that Lord Luxmore was taking medicine.

"Then there is the other poison. And here we come to a most serious point of evidence. It has been said by Dr. Mortimer that this poison is prepared only by the occult chemists of India and Ceylon. Now, it has been adduced in evidence that Lieutenant Wingrove has studied occult chemistry in Ceylon, and also, as elicited by the inquiries of Mr. Dred, that his instructor was Chundra Sin Mazunda—the man who, above all others, is famous for his skill in the compounding of the deadliest and subtlest vegetable poisons. I leave you, gentlemen, to draw your inferences from this fact.

"Coming to Lieutenant Wingrove's evidence, we see that he endeavoured to prove an alibi. He said that at ten minutes to six, having left Lord Luxmore alive and well in the library, he went into the drawing-room. Now, no one saw him leave the library; no one saw him in the drawing-room. We have nothing but his own word for it that on leaving the library he did not at once take up his overcoat and quit the house. We have nothing but his own word to show that he did not himself remove the wineglass from the room, and carry it—breaking it in his agitation—to his overcoat pocket. The butler saw him passing through the hall in a state of excitement.

"It will be remembered that by that time the butler had already noticed how quiet Lord Luxmore seemed to be. This is a very suspicious circumstance, and if you doubt Mr. Wingrove's words in any one point of

his evidence, then you will be justified in doubting his explanations concerning the condition in which he left the deceased, concerning the time at which he quitted the library, and concerning the whole story, plausible though it is, by which he has accounted for the wineglass fragments being found in his possession.

"But if you believe that in examination the witness spoke the truth—the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, then you must agree that while he was in the drawing-room, the actual assassin, whose identity we are seeking to discover, stealthily entered the library and committed the crime. You must, then, believe that the sound the witness asserts he heard was the sound that the murderer made in his entrance or exit through the library door. The moment, therefore, at which the crime was committed was necessarily between ten minutes to six and six o'clock. In that case you must assume that the agitation shown by the witness was not caused by the consciousness of guilt, but by the disappointment he had suffered and the insults he had endured in the course of the scene through which he had recently passed. And your duty is to determine who it was that passed in or out of the library when Mr Wingrove heard the mysterious door-opening sound, which no one else heard, and which, even at this final stage of the inquiry, remains entirely unaccounted for.

"If, indeed, that sound be not a fiction of Mr. Wingrove's imagination, then there can be no doubt that it was caused by the person who removed from the library the incriminating wineglass—that is to say, either the murderer himself or the murderer's no less guilty accomplice."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CASE AGAINST THE BUTLER.

AT the word "accomplice" a certain commotion was apparent in the room. The Coroner waited a few moments, as though meditating what point to take next.

"I apprehend," he said, "that you have already determined in your minds the extent to which the witness Wingrove is inculpated in this case. We cannot be blind to the fact that circumstances tell heavily against him. But if, in spite of this fact, you decide to give thorough credence to his evidence, then you must weigh the various points of that evidence with the greatest care. I would especially draw your attention to the statement by Mr. Wingrove that when, in leaving the house, he was passing down the narrow avenue, he heard quick footsteps behind him, and, on glancing back, saw the figure of a man disappear hastily among the trees. I shall presently return to that point. Meanwhile, I desire to impress upon you my opinion that there has been perjury, and very grave perjury, committed in the course of this inquest, and I may suggest the possibility that, although on the surface Mr. Wingrove does not appear to have had any premeditated reason for committing the crime, and although he had little time, and, as it appears to me, no opportunity, for tampering with the medicine-bottles, yet there is the possibility—I will use no stronger word—the bare possibility that he had an accomplice in Lena Luxmore."

There was not one of those who looked at the be-

trothed pair but felt his or her heart revolt at this mere suggestion of their association in crime. Never, surely, had those who knew her thought that even the idea of guilt could be connected with the pure, sweet girl, whose loveliness had something heavenly in it. And Paul—Paul, with his manly bearing, his sunny face, and smiling, sea-blue eyes, bright with the undaunted boldness that shrinks from nothing but dishonour—could murder ever be coupled with his name? The mind recoiled from such a thought.

"I pass now to another of the persons implicated," proceeded the Coroner in a voice cleared by the refreshment of a glass of water, "and that is the butler, Edward Bell."

The little old man, with his twinkling eyes and ripe-apple complexion, moved uneasily as his name was pronounced. He listened anxiously:

"To begin with the matter of the arsenic. It was Edward Bell's recognised duty to administer the medicine to his master. It was also Edward Bell's duty to pour out and carry into the library his master's daily glass of cordial. It will be seen, therefore, that Edward Bell had the fullest possible opportunity for freely and repeatedly giving the poison that Lord Luxmore is known to have taken. Again, he appears to have watched the effect of the medicine upon his master with a minute care that would hardly have been shown by anyone who did not know or suspect that something wrong was happening. He openly mentioned his suspicions of the medicine; but this is not incompatible with the theory that he had himself impregnated it with poison. We have seen, also, that he took it upon himself to throw some of the medicine away. But this happened just at the time when, as we may confidently assume, the intending murderer decided to use the orange cordial as a better means of conveying these malignant doses.

"Now let us consider the movements of Edward Bell on the afternoon of the fatal day.

"He states in his evidence that at a little before five o'clock he came into this room—the dining-room—and poured out his master's usual afternoon glass of orange wine from a bottle in the cellarette. The bottle, as we know, was free from poison. It had not been tampered with in any way. The glass must also have been quite clean, if, as he asserts, he wiped it out with a napkin. It seems impossible, therefore, that the arsenic powder could have been in the bottom of the glass when the wine was poured in. Having filled the glass, he carried it into the library—"

Here the butler started up, and evidently desired to speak. But he was summarily silenced.

"Having filled the glass, as I say, he carried it into the library," repeated the Coroner. "That was, as he declares, at five o'clock exactly. Lord Luxmore being still asleep, Bell put the glass down on the side table, and quietly withdrew. Take note of this fact, gentlemen—Lord Luxmore was asleep when that glass was taken into the library. It will be seen that the butler had every opportunity for dropping poison into that glass. At the same time, if you believe him to have thus dropped it in, you must ask yourselves why he did not avail himself of that most favourable opportunity—when his master lay sleeping before him—of using the *bikh*. On the other hand, if you believe his evidence, you must remember that from the time he quitted the room, leaving the glass on the table, until the moment when Lord Luxmore awoke, that glass of orange cordial stood open to the manipulation of any person who chose to enter the room in a sufficiently stealthy manner.

"And now, here is a point, gentlemen, to which I desire especially to call your attention. This quarter of an hour or more that elapsed between the taking in

of the cordial and Lord Luxmore's awakening—for he did not wake, we are told, until a quarter past five—this quarter of an hour, I repeat, afforded the best possible opportunity, not only for the dropping of the arsenic into the wine, but also for the employing of the terrible and instantaneous *bikh;* and the fact that the *bikh* was not then used seems to suggest one of two conclusions—either that the motive for instant murder was not yet existent, or fully developed, or else that the actual murderer was not yet in the house. The former of these conclusions would tend to incriminate the witness Wingrove. The latter would deeply incriminate the deceased's nephew. Again I must point to the significance of the fact that both these young men had an intimate knowledge of poisons, and that both had equal facilities for procuring the *bikh*—the one by reason of his travels, the other by reason of his profession.

"To proceed with the butler. He states that on quitting the library after carrying in the cordial, he went to his pantry and remained there until about ten minutes to six. He then went with a taper to light the lamps in the library, but was deterred from doing so, as he says, by hearing a dispute going on within the room. This excuse appears sufficiently reasonable. He then, as he asserts, left the taper in the great hall, and went away again. It is singular that simply because he could not enter the library he left the other rooms and the hall unlighted. But he explains this by saying that Beatrix Luxmore came to the door of the drawing-room and ordered him not to light up yet. In this explanation he has been flatly contradicted by the young lady herself, But I shall presently show you that her contradiction is open to doubt. Assuming that she did thus tell the butler to leave the place in darkness, we find that Bell left the taper in the hall, and went back to the servants' quarters. At six o'clock he returned again to the hall, and was pro-

ceeding, as he states, to light his taper at the fire, when Lieutenant Wingrove appeared upon the scene, and, by suggesting that Lord Luxmore should not be disturbed, once more prevented him from fulfilling his domestic duties.

"There appears to have been a remarkable unanimity among the various members of the household in desiring that on this particular evening the rooms should be left in darkness—a unanimity which would suggest, were such a thing not practically impossible, that every member of the family was accessory to the crime, either before or after the fact.

"At this stage of his evidence the butler implicates Lieutenant Wingrove. But his evidence is disappointing. The fact that he was so near to the rooms and corridors under consideration ought, one would think, to have enabled him to throw considerable light upon the mystery. But he appears to have seen and heard no one, with the single exception of Mr. Wingrove. It is true that, if his statements are to be accepted, he was not in the hall more than a moment before Mr. Wingrove appeared—in fact, that he had just reached the hall, taken up the taper, and begun to light it at the fire. It is also true that the great hall is to some extent shut off by tapestry hangings from the inner hall and corridors, and that the carpets on the floor are so thick that the sound of footsteps is necessarily deadened. Nevertheless, if it be a fact that Lieutenant Wingrove heard the opening and closing of the library door, then the butler ought also to have heard that sound. Even more certainly, he ought to have met the person who came out by that door, for that the person, if not a mere invented shadow, *came out* and did not go in is proved by the fact that the wineglass was already in the pocket of Mr. Wingrove's overcoat. The person who put it there must therefore only by an instant of time have avoided encountering either the

butler coming one way or Lieutenant Wingrove coming the other.

"I may remind you that there could only have been two ways by which such a person could elude encounter or observation—namely, by hiding in the alcove where the overcoat was hung, or by escaping through the small door that faces the opening of the alcove, and leads to the servants' quarters, and also, indirectly, to this dining-room."

"Good," muttered Michael Dred, with an approving nod.

One or two faces in the assembly had grown noticeably paler than before.

"But," argued the Coroner, leaning slightly forward, "there is one possibility that would very well explain why the mysterious person who carried out the wine-glass was not encountered by the butler, and that is the possibility that that person was the butler himself. From ten minutes to six until six o'clock, Bell appears to have been wandering vaguely about the neighbourhood of the hall, and to have been the only person doing so. We have already seen that he had full opportunity for putting arsenic into the cordial. We now see that between ten minutes to six and six o'clock he had ample opportunity for carrying away the empty glass —also for putting it into the overcoat pocket. Bell was the only person in the house whose entrance into the library would have provoked no remark had he been seen. He had legitimate excuse for going in at almost any time—to attend to the fire, or, in this instance, openly to remove the glass from which his master had been drinking. Also, Mr. Wingrove has given it as his impression that when he came upon the butler in the hall, Bell was burning something.

"Now, burning something is very different from lighting a taper, and it may be put forth as a theory that the butler merely held the taper in his hand as an excuse, while he burned the handkerchief or napkin

with which he had wiped out the poison sediment from the glass. We have it on Mr. Wingrove's authority that when the butler was come upon bending over the fire he appeared startled.

"But now the question suggests itself: Did he use the *bikh?* He had free access to the library after Mr. Wingrove's departure. But Lord Luxmore, if he was still alive, was then awake. Now, even supposing that Bell knew of this rare poison, *bikh*, and had succeeded in obtaining it, does it appear possible that this little elderly man could have gone into the library and subdued his master without a sound being heard? It may, perhaps, be possible, but I venture to assert that it is not likely. Many things tend to show a probability that he wilfully administered the arsenic to Lord Luxmore. If you find that this was so, you may, I think, leave the question of the aconite to be determined by another court than this.

"Coming to the butler's motive, we find it very weak. Bell had been in his master's service for a great number of years. He had very few interests outside that service, and in it he seems to have been entirely comfortable. As for his possession of the watch, I am bound to say that it has not been satisfactorily accounted for. Bell's explanation seems a natural one, but the corroborating letter to the watchmaker has not been found. It is for you to decide whether or not he is to be believed in this matter. It is a remarkable coincidence that the watch stopped at five minutes to six—a time very close indeed to that when the final blow in the tragedy must have been dealt. The butler explains this by telling us that the watch stopped at that same time in the morning. This is an improbable coincidence, but by no means an impossible one. It must also be remembered that if theft had been the butler's motive, there were scores of valuable articles in the house which he might have taken without violence, and probably with little risk of detection."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHITEWASHED.

WHEN the Coroner paused, the great room was sombre almost to darkness, with the reflected gloom of masses of storm-clouds that hung low in the grey sky. Presently the rain poured down in thick, heavy drops, that struck as if in anger against the panes of the lofty windows. The fire on the wide hearth burned brightly. But the faces of all present looked wan and awe-stricken in the chill light.

"It is a horrible thing to reflect that the murderer may be here now—here in this room—among us," murmured Lord Mountstuart in Lena's ear.

"No, no," she denied, shuddering as she glanced around her. She was thinking of one who was not there. "There is he—who has fled—"

She broke off. Mountstuart bent nearer to her.

"Reginald?" he asked.

Her lips formed the word "Yes." But he shook his head.

"No," he said earnestly. "I cannot believe it is Reginald. He is bad, he is headstrong, wild, despicable, if you like; but he has not done this thing. And if he has not, why, then the murderer must be here, breathing the same air with us, lifting his eyes to the same light."

"If I believed that, I could not stay here," Lena answered, speaking below her breath.

And she put her hand in the hand of Paul, who sat beside her. She felt that but for the comfort of his

love, she would rather have been dead with her father than live on in this agony of doubt.

"We next come to the consideration of Dr. Hale," resumed the Coroner. "The motive alleged against him is utterly insignificant. It is impossible to believe for a moment that a medical man of the position of Dr. Hale could have troubled himself about the problematical opposition of Reginald Luxmore. With regard to the medicine, it was not dispensed by Dr. Hale, but by the local chemist, and only on two occasions, when he is said to have taken the bottles from the boy charged to deliver them, does it appear possible that Dr. Hale could have tampered with the tonic after it was made up. We know that the doctor was not in the house at the time when the cordial was poisoned. Nor, so far as we can gather from the evidence, could he possibly have been in the house at the time when the actual murder was committed. You have, of course, to remember that he knew the house and grounds thoroughly, and might possibly, therefore, have entered the library by the window that was ajar. You must also ask yourselves whether or not he could have been the man who was seen by Mr. Wingrove to dart behind the trees in the narrow avenue."

The doctor, thus easily disposed of, stretched his limbs, as though relieved from a great mental tension. It was now the turn of Mrs. Vayne. That lady appeared—somewhat unexpectedly—quite calm in anticipation of the ordeal. Her eyes had not yet lost the strange look of wonder that had lately come into them.

"Mrs. Vayne," began the Coroner, "occupies a peculiar position with regard to this case. Moving, as she did, in the same rank of life as the Luxmore family, yet not being of them, a good deal of ill-feeling has existed against her. It is true that her movements on the fatal evening have the same vague mysteriousness as those of the rest of the household;

it is also true that she was, as far as we know, the first person to enter the library after the butler had left the glass of cordial beside the chair of his sleeping master. Nevertheless, I submit that there is no direct evidence to connect her in any way with the crime. As in the case of Dr. Hale, the motive against her is weak. She is supposed to have been apprehensive of losing her position in the household as a consequence of Lord Luxmore's marriage. If murder could be contemplated for motives so slight, we should all be in danger of violent death. Mrs. Vayne was not, perhaps, always in harmony with the deceased. But it does not appear that in that matter she was exceptional. Her possible motive has certainly been strengthened by the evidence of Beatrix Luxmore, given this morning, in which it is alleged that Mrs. Vayne had a hot dispute with the deceased on the morning of the day of his death. But I would point out to you that the person who for days, or perhaps weeks, had been slowly poisoning—or attempting to poison—Lord Luxmore, must have had a bitter motive of long standing.

"Undoubtedly, Mrs. Vayne had access to the medicine bottles; undoubtedly, too, she had full opportunity for poisoning the glass of orange wine. Moreover, in spite of her apparent ignorance of the nature of arsenic, she, in common with three other members of the household, had quantities of this poison ready to her hand. All these facts tell against her. Furthermore, on the Tuesday afternoon, she was the first to announce that Lord Luxmore had awakened. She states that she came downstairs at about a quarter past five for the first time after returning from her walk. But a housemaid asserts that she saw her come downstairs at five o'clock. This quarter of an hour makes a great deal of difference. Unfortunately, in the matter of time, witnesses are rarely to be depended upon.

"Mrs. Vayne assures us that on coming down she did not enter the library, but merely opened the door and looked in. This is probably true, as the butler had at that moment spoken to her, and must have been near at hand. I think it may be confidently assumed that she did not then have time to enter the library, go up to the deceased's chair, drop poison into the wineglass beside him, and then awaken him and ask him if he would see Mr. Wingrove.

"Turning to her movements later in the evening, we find that she came downstairs at a few minutes past six, and came into this room, where Lieutenant Wingrove saw her as he passed the window. She was then standing by the sideboard, lighting the lamp, as she asserts. She admits that she reached this room by a circuitous route, and gives no clear reason for having done so. When, in coming by that circuitous route, she passed by the library door, she saw no one and heard nothing—nor, strange to say, was she herself seen. It is certainly true that she might have been in the library at the moment when we suppose the *bikh* to have been administered, but the same is true of at least three other witnesses. Two of these other witnesses had far better facilities than Mrs. Vayne for knowing of the existence of the poison *bikh*, and for procuring it."

A juryman here interrupted the speech by rising and handing a slip of paper to the Coroner, who read what was written, and then tore the paper up.

"The information is valuable," he said to the juryman, "but it comes too late. It is impossible for me to take cognisance of matters that have not been drawn out in evidence."

He then continued:

"I think I have mentioned all the facts that tend to implicate Mrs. Vayne. It must be admitted that there is a good deal of circumstantial evidence against

her, but there is no real evidence. With one exception, not a single fact connecting her even negatively with the crime has been corroborated. The exception is the mere circumstance that she was in the dining-room at the time of Mr. Wingrove's departure. We have considerable testimony as to what she might have done, but none whatever as to what she did do. The scratch upon her hand is a very doubtful point, and it remains entirely for you to decide whether you believe her account of it to be a true one, or whether you think it in any way suggests that she was the person who carried the wineglass from the library. Mrs. Vayne has been fifteen years in the Luxmore family, and it seems absurd to suppose that after so long a time she should have developed a motive for committing a deed of such unnameable blackness and horror."

Considerable satisfaction was visible on Mrs. Vayne's well-preserved countenance. She glanced defiantly at Michael Dred; but his answering look did not confirm her triumph.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE COUSINS.

"Now we turn to the younger daughter and her cousin, Reginald Luxmore. I take these two together, because there are many suggestions of collusion between them, and the motive of the man might in itself have been, through her love for him, a sufficient motive for the girl. It is a most terrible thing that the evidence should have led us for one moment to consider this question of possible parricide. But many circumstances that have transpired, and the conduct of Beatrix Luxmore throughout these proceedings, combine to convince us that the dreadful possibility exists. Beatrix Luxmore has the reputation of having been a wilful and disobedient daughter, and we are told that very rarely was there a bright and pleasant word exchanged between her and her father. It is thoroughly in keeping with her character that she should have chosen to bestow her love on an unworthy man, and the one whom, above all others, her father most objected to as a suitor for her. Setting aside the questionable personal character of Reginald Luxmore, the deceased was known to hold very strong opinions concerning marriages of consanguinity. For this reason, if for no other, he would never while he lived have countenanced his daughter's union with her cousin.

"As often happens in the case of girls of a passionate and reckless nature, Beatrix Luxmore's love for her cousin was as intense and desperate as the

aversion she felt for her father was unnatural and inexplicable. It is certain that, where both her lover and her father were in question, the father would not for a moment have been considered. And now comes a grave point. You have heard the maid, Celestine Boutry, say that Beatrix Luxmore once playfully told her that the greatest ambition of her life was to be a Lady Luxmore. She would rather have that title than be a duchess. The remark shows how intently her mind was set upon marrying her cousin. But it was set with equal intentness upon that cousin's becoming Baron Luxmore. Her love was not of the kind that marries into poverty and is happy. It was of a fierce and determined character, such as would clear a path for the loved one, even through blood.

"We have seen how she clung to her scapegrace cousin, corresponding with him and meeting him against her father's express commands, and by the light of our knowledge of her character and intentions we can guess what she felt when the rumour leaked out in the household that her father intended to marry again and disinherit her lover. I think it speaks eloquently of the fierce opposition which the deceased met with in his household that he was compelled to keep the fact of his intentions to contract an honourable marriage as secret as if he had been contemplating the perpetration of a crime. None can tell what bitterness Lord Luxmore endured. Surrounded with honour, splendour, and esteem, his life was yet cankered at its very centre—his home. The irritability which he showed was probably induced in him by the miseries he had to bear. Who can tell but that he had often feared the cowardly blow that struck him down at last on the very threshold of an alliance that might have restored to him the happiness of which his children—but especially his younger daughter—had deprived him?"

The sound of sobs from Lady Ormidale mingled

with the lashing of the rain against the windows. Pain and emotion were on every face save the stony face of Beatrix and the sallow, rigid countenance of Michael Dred.

"When this fact, that the deceased was on the eve of a second marriage, was known, or rather guessed, in the household," pursued the Coroner, "Beatrix Luxmore, who maintained a close connection with her cousin, wrote to him a letter, in which she bade him come to the house, and bring with him 'the thing that is to seal our fate.' There is no mention in this letter of her father's matrimonial intentions, and we do not know whether she had already communicated to her cousin this information, or whether she intended to communicate it verbally on the occasion of their meeting. Probably the latter was her intention, in which case Lord Luxmore's own letter to his nephew contained the first intimation that Reginald Luxmore had ever received of the approaching marriage, and the suddenness of the announcement would create in the young man a far greater rage than he would have felt had he been prepared for the news.

"The mysterious terms in which Beatrix Luxmore's letter to her cousin is couched suggest something deeper and darker than the explanation given that the object of her writing was merely to arrange a lovers' interview. If the article alluded to by her as 'the thing which is to seal our fate' was only a betrothal ring, why should they not both have at once admitted the fact? Does it not seem probable that the thing in question was of a deadly nature—poison, or some weapon—and that the words 'to seal our fate' meant, in plain terms, that the thing brought was to be employed in cutting off the life of Lord Luxmore ere he should have time to achieve his purpose of alienating his nephew's—and consequently his infatuated daughter's—inheritance?

"Let us consider the conduct of Beatrix and

Reginald Luxmore on the actual evening of the murder.

"In the first place, Beatrix Luxmore, while Mr. Wingrove was yet in the library, came to the drawing-room door and requested the butler not to light the lamps. She denies having done so, but her evidence cannot in this particular be accepted against Bell's. Having thus secured that the lower rooms should be left for a time in gloom, she retired to the conservatory, there to await the arrival of her lover and possible confederate. She was still in the conservatory when Mr. Wingrove entered the drawing-room—and I may remark that the fact of his having heard her moving there practically confirms Wingrove's evidence, since, if he had not gone into the drawing-room, he could not possibly have known that there was anyone in the conservatory.

"Now, it is worthy of note that Mr. Wingrove heard these movements before he heard the noise of the library door opening. It is, therefore, possible that, supposing Beatrix Luxmore to have been the mysterious poisoner—and we know that she had administered a doze of the medicine to her father on that morning—she could have gone through the grounds from the conservatory to the library window, have entered the dark library, have removed the wine-glass, thrust it into the overcoat pocket, and hurried back through the library to the conservatory again before Lieutenant Wingrove quitted the drawing-room.

"This, I repeat, is possible. And herein comes the further consideration: Did both this girl and her lover enter the library in those moments and together commit the deed? Beatrix Luxmore may have discovered that the arsenic was ineffectual. Reginald Luxmore, by his own admission, was at that precise time loitering outside the library windows. Gentlemen of the jury, I ask you to consider this point well. The crime

was not committed by a shadow or a spirit, but by a palpable, visible human being. Now, is it possible that, with Reginald Luxmore patrolling outside the library windows, any person—other than his cousin—could have obtained admission into the library from outside unnoticed by him?

"I think it is not possible. I submit that between ten minutes to six and six o'clock—at which time, as we calculated, the murder was committed—only two persons could possibly have entered the library through the unfastened window. And those two persons were Beatrix and Reginald Luxmore."

Beatrix roused herself from her torpor. The dry, bright eyes looked full at the Coroner's face.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE.

UNMOVED by the half-fierce, half-wistful gaze of the girl's feverishly brilliant eyes, the Coroner went on :

" There is no doubt that Beatrix Luxmore has not only deliberately withheld much valuable evidence, but it is proved most incontrovertibly that she has frequently perjured herself in the course of the evidence she has actually given. I will not dwell upon the fact of her denial of the butler's assertion that she told him not to light the lamps. I will turn to another example—one in which the perjury has been more clearly proved. I allude to her statement, deliberately repeated, that she saw no one from the time she first entered the conservatory, at a quarter to six, until the time, three-quarters of an hour later, when Miss Luxmore's cry for help came from the library.

" Now, this statement was gross perjury, and perjury of a most dangerous kind, since it withheld information which bore directly upon this inquiry. The fact that the truth has since been arrived at in no way lessens Beatrix Luxmore's culpability in this matter. And it must be remembered that but for the chance circumstance of her having written a letter—or rather two letters—to her cousin, and of those letters having been found, in all probability the fact that Reginald Luxmore had been within these walls on the fatal evening would never have been revealed.

" Now, if the motive of his coming to this house on

that evening had been what he has declared it to be, connected only with his clandestine courtship, what need was there for him and his cousin thus to suppress the fact of his presence here? You will remember that while, in her unwilling evidence, Beatrix Luxmore omitted even the slightest allusion to Mr. Luxmore, he, on his part, strenuously denied having been a step nearer this house than the spot at which Mrs. Vayne met him in the course of her afternoon walk. His confession that he had been within the house was made only when the fact could no longer be denied, it having been conclusively proved in a letter written to him by his cousin and never received by him. I refer to the second letter of the two sent to him by Beatrix Luxmore—the one which was written after the tragedy, and was found unopened at his rooms, having been delivered while he was away. I will quote the letter at length:

"'Luxmore Park,

"'Wednesday Morning, *Oct.* 16, 1872.

"'REGGIE—dearest now, as always—I have hardly presence of mind enough to write to you. The awful discovery was made by Lena. Oh, the horror of it! I thought I should have gone mad when I saw him lying there, and knew—and knew—but I must not say it. My brain is in a whirl. Oh, surely I am the most unhappy being on the face of the earth!

"'There is talk of Lieut. Wingrove being suspected. Everyone believes he was the last who saw my father alive. Michael Dred has been telegraphed for. Do not come down here. Who can say what the consequences would be if anyone should discover that you were here last night in that terrible hour? I cannot tell you how relieved I was to find you were gone when I rushed back from the library. I implore you not to come down. You will learn what goes on from the newspapers. I cannot write again—not

yet. But believe always in my love, even though the worst should happen, and even though that love has brought me wretchedness unspeakable—a misery that will never leave me any more while I live. *Destroy this letter!*—Your despairing 'BEATRIX.'

"This letter, gentlemen, proves more than that Reginald Luxmore was here on the evening, and at the very time of the murder. It shows that the writer was in a very extraordinary state of mind, and not by any means the state of mind in which one would expect to find an innocent girl on the morning following her father's sudden and violent death. There is no grief shown in this letter, not a word of sorrow for the father whom she had lost; neither—and I must ask you to bear this well in mind—is there any consternation, or even surprise, at the strange and terrible manner of his death. There is horror; but it is the horror of a physical rather than a mental revolt from the crime: the horror of one whose brain and heart might have been bold enough and cruel enough to plan the deed, but whose nerves are weak when she beholds the result. There is also alarm; but it is not alarm lest her father's assassin should go undetected. It is alarm lest her lover should be in any way implicated—a desperate alarm that is inexplicable except in the light of some knowledge on her part of that lover's guilt. Indeed, the whole letter, hysterical as it is and well-nigh incoherent, is inexplicable unless it is considered from that point of view—that both the writer and the receiver knew perfectly well who the murderer was, and how the crime was committed.

"You will observe that the letter gives no information as to the tragedy. It implies an absolute previous knowledge on the part of the person to whom it was addressed. Now, this letter was written early on the morning following the perpetration of the crime. For various reasons no intimation of the occurrence had

yet been made public, and the morning newspapers of Wednesday contained no announcement even of the main fact of Lord Luxmore's death. How, therefore, could Reginald Luxmore, if he were innocent, have obtained all the information which this letter supposed him to possess?

"We have heard, indeed, that on the actual Tuesday night he received a telegram announcing his uncle's death. But a telegram could not possibly have conveyed a tithe of the information he must have possessed to make this letter intelligible to him. Where, then—supposing him to be innocent—did he learn the rest? Not from Beatrix Luxmore on that Tuesday evening, for she expressly says in this letter that when she went back from the library—presumably just after her sister's discovery of their father's body—Reginald Luxmore was gone.

"I want to impress this point upon you. Reginald Luxmore had left this house before the discovery of the crime, and yet Beatrix Luxmore, early on the following morning, writes to him as though he knew every circumstance connected with the dreadful occurrence. I ask you, is this compatible with innocence either on her part or on his?

"Furthermore, she says that she was relieved to find him gone. She proceeds: 'Who can tell what the consequences would be if anyone should discover that you were here last night in that terrible hour?'

"Now, if he and she were innocent, why need such a thought have entered her mind? If she had known him to be innocent, would she not have gone to him, have cried to him even, for comfort and support in her horror and anguish, and have wished him to remain in order to help her and her sister in their great trial? It is not as if he had been a stranger, or even a distant relative. Being who he was, he had every right to remain here; his right place was here. From the moment of Lord Luxmore's death he was

the head of the family. And yet he slunk away like a guilty interloper, and the murdered man's daughter is 'relieved' to find him fled. More than this, she implores him not to come down to Luxmore—to the place, be it remembered, where he was most needed, and where at the time it was his duty as well as to his interest to be if innocent. If there had not been a perfect understanding between them, would he not necessarily have looked upon such counsel as sheer madness? As it chanced, he did not receive the letter; but the fact that of his own impulse he acted exactly as if he had received it appears to me to be a very singular and suggestive circumstance. It shows that his mind and that of his cousin were in absolute unison.

"Again. Beatrix Luxmore alludes to the rumour that suspicion is attaching itself to Lieutenant Wingrove. She makes this allusion in a reassuring manner. And then comes a very remarkable sentence. Referring to Mr. Wingrove, she says, 'Everyone believes he was the last who saw my father alive.'

"Consider this sentence for a moment. She does not say 'We believe,' but 'Everyone believes'—in the manner of a person who has been feeling the pulse of public opinion, and writes to a confederate to tell him the result. That she was herself perfectly well aware of the compromising nature of the communication is obvious from her underlined caution, '*Destroy this letter.*'

"Lastly, throughout the whole letter there is a tone of half-recoil from the man to whom she writes. She assures him that she loves him still dearly as before—which implies that something had recently transpired to test and strain that love. She states that her love has brought her wretchedness unspeakable—'a misery that will never leave me any more while I live.' That misery must have been very recently caused, for we find no hint of it in the previous letter. Also, it looks

something like remorse. This idea of remorse has also been suggested by her bearing throughout this inquest—a remorse that is not true repentance, but only terror for herself, and possibly also for her accomplice. Whatever you may say of her, gentlemen, this fact is plain, that on that Tuesday evening the way was paved for the crime, and that such preparation could only have been made by some member of the household — I might say of the family."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE CRUCIAL HOUR.

"WE have seen that at six o'clock on the evening of the murder Reginald Luxmore was loitering outside the library windows. A few moments later, as he says, he entered—by the garden door—the conservatory, where Beatrix Luxmore was awaiting him. They must have remained there together for some minutes if, as has been stated, they did not go into the drawing-room until a quarter past six, when Lieutenant Wingrove had departed. At this point I will once more warn you against implicitly accepting witnesses' statements as to time. In the case of Mr. Wingrove an exception may be made. He is known to have caught the half-past six train, therefore we may safely assume that he did leave this house at the time he states. But the evidence of other witnesses as to time is entirely uncorroborated.

"On the strength of Reginald Luxmore's word, we have it that he and his cousin went into the inner drawing-room at about a quarter past six. A few minutes later Beatrix Luxmore rose and left him for a little while. He declares that he does not know why she left him, or where she went. It has been thought that she went then to tell the butler not to light the lamps. But that could not be, because it was already long past the usual time for lighting, and the butler distinctly asserts that she had given him those instructions when he came into the hall first, before Lieutenant Wingrove had quitted the library.

"Now, is it not more probable that, the murder having been already committed, she had stolen into the library to assure herself that the victim was certainly dead? Perhaps, also, her object was to see that the way was clear for her lover's escape. Reginald Luxmore's evidence at this point was reluctant and unsatisfactory. When questioned as to her manner when she returned, he said that he did not notice any change in it; but he spoke so hesitatingly that his answer cannot be trusted. He admits, however, that after her return they spoke very little. Was such strange silence natural in a lovers' interview?

"It may have occurred to some of you that during that short absence from her cousin, Beatrix Luxmore brought away the wineglass from the library. But that could not be, because Lieutenant Wingrove had gone away with the glass in his pocket fully a quarter of an hour before. It seems more likely that the person who used the *bikh* knew perfectly well of the arsenic that had been previously used by his accomplice, and that he himself removed the wineglass after dealing the final blow.

"Supposing Reginald Luxmore to have entered the library by the window, what more easy than for him to have carried out the glass through the library door, thrust it into the pocket—and the alcove where the overcoat hung is but a few paces away—and then slip back through the dark library again, out by the window, and round the house by the garden to the conservatory door?

"It may be argued that he could not possibly have known that Lieutenant Wingrove, upon leaving the library, had not immediately put on his overcoat. But there was Beatrix Luxmore to tell him. She, in the conservatory, must have known that Mr. Wingrove was waiting about in the drawing-room; indeed, she would not have expected him to go in quest of his overcoat at all, since it was understood that he intended

to remain to dinner. Nothing would have been easier than for her to run round from the conservatory to where her lover was loitering outside the library windows, and suggest to him the overcoat as a means of disposing of the incriminating glass. For my own part, I am inclined to think the explanation a likely one. There is something cunning and treacherous in the idea of thus placing the glass where it could accuse another, which would argue that it sprang from a feminine brain.

"In the matter of motive, suspicion points strongly to the guilt of Reginald Luxmore—more strongly, I will venture to affirm, than to that of any other person implicated in the case. The crime was committed at a crisis in his affairs, when his uncle's death was the one thing that could save him from ruin. We have evidence from the first of her letters that his cousin was fully aware of his troubles. She must also have been aware that unless he were promptly saved, her union with him must for ever remain an impossibility. It is a dreadful fact, but nevertheless a fact, that her father's life was at that moment an obstacle in the path of her love and her ambition. It is a horrible thing to mention parricide in connection with a young girl, still almost a child, nobly born, and if not well brought up—since she was motherless—at least well educated. With regard to the arsenic, it is possible that she, at her lover's instigation, living in the house and having every facility for doing so, first tried this means of compassing her father's death. It must be remembered that the arsenic got from Paris, ostensibly for toilet purposes, was ordered specially for her.

"It is for you to decide the respective parts played by her and her cousin in this terrible tragedy. You must bear well in mind the fact that by reason of his profession, Reginald Luxmore would probably have known of the poison *bikh*, and would certainly have

been able to procure it with greater ease than any other of those upon whom suspicion has fallen, with the exception of Lieutenant Wingrove. At the same time, in weighing these respective facilities, the characters of the two men must be taken into consideration. The young naval officer's career appears to have been honourable and blameless in all respects. On the other hand, Reginald Luxmore's career has been that of an idle, reckless, and often vicious spendthrift. The one came here promptly in answer to the summons, has remained here ever since, and has faced all inquiry with a genial willingness which goes far in his favour. The other was brought here almost by force, gave false and misleading evidence, and on that same day mysteriously disappeared, and has not since been heard of. It remains for you to ask yourselves the reason of this disappearance.

"The person whom Lieutenant Wingrove declares that he saw behind him in the narrow avenue remains unidentified and unaccounted for. I do not myself attach much importance to this shadowy individual. We know that at the time when this person was seen in the avenue Reginald Luxmore was hovering about the library windows. It is improbable, therefore, that any stranger could have obtained access to the library from outside without being observed by Mr. Luxmore, who, for his own sake, would have been only too eager to mention the circumstance. The figure seen by Mr. Wingrove may possibly have been one of the gamekeepers or other servants on the estate."

The Coroner drew a deep breath as of relief. He leaned a little back in his seat.

"Gentlemen of the jury, I think I have now reviewed all the important points of the mass of evidence which has been laid before us. It is for you and not for me finally to determine and declare how and by whom Lord Luxmore's death was caused. I must ask you not to let yourselves be influenced by any prejudice

whatsoever, not to take into consideration either youth or sex or position, but to be actuated solely by the desire to arrive at the truth, and to give your unanimous verdict simply according to the evidence as you have heard it, and as I have since set it before you. If the verdict you unanimously give shall charge any person or persons with the wilful murder of Lord Luxmore, then that person or those persons will be forthwith arrested and brought to trial."

The marble clock on the mantelpiece struck five as the Coroner ceased speaking. When the solemn strokes were ended, the jurymen rose and retired to the library, there on the scene of the crime to solve the problem of its perpetration.

CHAPTER XL.

THE VERDICT.

THE Coroner sank back in his chair with closed eyes. In answer to a question from Michael Dred, he stated that he intended to remain where he was until the return of the jury. Meanwhile some refreshments were brought him. Michael Dred himself preferred to leave the court-room.

The first shades of dusk were stealing into the sombre dining-hall, where a deep silence reigned. Outside, the rain storm had cleared away with the coming of evening. Despite the bad weather, the crowd that all day had been pressing about the Luxmore gates had not diminished. Now, at the news that the jury had retired to consider their verdict, its numbers momentarily swelled. From the gates they could see nothing of the mansion save the tops of its two grey turrets. The tall trees of the winding avenue hid the rest of the gloomy building from their curious gaze.

Within the house there prevailed the subdued agitation of a deep suspense. Of the persons immediately concerned in the verdict, only Dr. Hale and Lena Luxmore remained in the court-room—the doctor with his substantial figure comfortably ensconced near the fire, and Lena alternately sitting in one of the deep window-seats and pacing to and fro, noiselessly across the carpeted floor. Above the red carpet her black trailing robes seemed to gather a

deeper blackness. And in the window-seat how fair she looked with her head leaning backward against the oaken shutter, and her lovely, pathetic face white and pure as the white flowers that she had fastened at her throat!

At her own wish Paul had left her for a few moments. She had noticed that he was pale, and had hoped that he would go out for a little while into the freshness of the rain-cleared air. For herself, she could not. She felt that she dared not leave that room. It was impossible that the jury could return yet. Indeed, it was likely that they would occupy hours in their deliberations. And yet she remained there, listening intently, inwardly quivering with momentary expectancy and suspense.

Beatrix, refusing to speak, meeting the gaze of those around her with a wild, heart-breaking blankness, had risen from her seat and walked unsteadily from the room. Her figure, always slight, was becoming far too frail for health. Her eyes—unnaturally large in her small, white face—and the gold gleam of her hair were now the only signs of life and warmth about her. As she left the room Lena had whispered to Mrs. Vayne to follow her, and that lady, smiling, yet vaguely disturbed, graciously did so.

Lord Mountstuart, greatly against his will, had left Lena's presence to escort the brilliant Lady Ormidale to afternoon tea in the drawing-room. Bell brought in the tea, and his hands trembled so that the delicate porcelain service was scarcely safe in his care. The old butler did not know much about the processes of the law, and he probably fancied that the continuance of his head upon his shoulders depended on the deliberations of those twelve men shut up in the chamber of death.

Michael Dred also partook of afternoon tea. Half an hour later, he and Lady Ormidale were alone in the drawing-room.

"Why did you come down here?" he asked her in the suave voice he usually adopted when speaking to women. "Was it from mere feminine caprice?"

"No," she answered him, with a faint smile. She was certainly very handsome, and her soft beauty showed in striking contrast with the detective's sallow, worn countenance, lit by its deep-set, glittering eyes. "No, anxiety and restlessness drove me here."

"You are anxious for vengeance—anxious to see your affianced husband's murderer punished?"

"Yes." She shuddered as she spoke. "And yet—"

She broke off. Michael Dred watched her narrowly. For a long time they sat thus silently, the one deep in thought, the other closely observing her. There was a look of apprehension in Lady Ormidale's eyes. The violet-gray pupils were dilated, but, although their gaze rested on Michael Dred, they did not see him.

"Lady Ormidale," he said at last, in a low voice, "you should divine better than any of us who was Lord Luxmore's murderer. You knew his secrets—knew what enemies he had. Surely you could point, if you chose, to the man who struck him down."

"I cannot—I know nothing," answered Lady Ormidale, clasping her hands. Suddenly the hall clock struck six. She started. "It is just a week ago at this hour—perhaps at this moment—that it happened!" she exclaimed, growing paler.

"Your nerves are weak," smiled Michael Dred. "You should not have come here."

Unconsciously she touched his arm.

"Tell me, Mr. Dred—have you heard anything of Reginald Luxmore?"

But before the answer could be given, Paul Wingrove entered the room.

"The Coroner has been summoned by the jury to the library," he announced.

. . . . .

The reason of that summons was then being explained to the Coroner by the foreman of the jury.

"We are confronted with a difficulty, sir. We find that suspicion points strongly to a certain person, and yet we are not prepared to go to the length of bringing in a verdict of wilful murder against that person, and we want to know what alternative we have."

"Your only alternative is to bring in an open verdict," answered the Coroner.

"And suppose we bring in an open verdict? Will the matter end there? Will the murderers, in consequence, go unpunished?"

"By no means," replied the Coroner. "If you state yourselves satisfied that the deceased was wilfully murdered, then the further investigation of the case will be at once placed in the hands of the police."

"The fact is," said the foreman, "we are divided in our opinions. We feel that the whole truth has not yet been brought out, and, therefore, we cannot unanimously resolve to publicly fix the guilt upon any single person. On the other hand, we could not reconcile ourselves to give a verdict that would have the effect of hushing up the matter. The majority of us believe the assassin to be the present Lord Luxmore, and several believe Beatrix Luxmore to have been an accessory before the fact."

"It is not for me to advise you on any other than strictly legal points," said the Coroner gravely. "I can only repeat that your verdict, whatever it is, must be unanimous."

He then withdrew.

Hour after hour dragged slowly by. At last, at nine o'clock, the jury returned into court. Amid breathless silence the Coroner spoke:

"Gentlemen of the jury, are you agreed upon your verdict?"

"We are," came the somewhat slow reply. "We

find that the deceased Baron Luxmore came by his death by means of two poisons—arsenic and aconite, or *bikh*—wilfully and maliciously administered by some person or persons unknown."

CHAPTER XLI.

THE FAREWELL.

THE silence that followed the delivery of the verdict was broken by one sound only—the bursting into tears of Beatrix Luxmore. In the corner to which she had retreated—the darkest corner of the great lamplit room—she had hidden her face in her hands, and was sobbing wildly.

Slowly then the assemblage broke up. The inquest was over, and the mystery of Lord Luxmore's death was still unsolved.

The hovering shadow of horror had not lifted from the house. It seemed to deepen as one by one the members of the jury rose from their completed task and filed out into the night. A few technicalities remained still for the Coroner to complete, but within an hour he, too, departed. In the night-shrouded mansion undiscovered guilt was left triumphantly enthroned.

Murmurs of dissatisfaction arose on every side, and some surprise was expressed that a verdict had not been returned against the young Lord Luxmore. After a while it leaked out that the jury had been upon the point of returning such a verdict. It was further whispered that measures were in contemplation for bringing him to justice.

Meanwhile, in the vestibule and hall, the members of the household and the guests had gathered in groups. A strange awe pervaded the atmosphere

making itself felt even through the restlessness of leave-takings and departures. Michael Dred was speaking apart with Lena, bidding her farewell.

"Have you done all you can do?" she asked him desperately. "It is terrible for us to be left in this darkness and doubt."

"I have done all that can be done as yet," answered the detective gloomily. "In two days' time I expect to start in search of Lord Luxmore."

"I doubt if you will find him," murmured Lady Ormidale, who was standing near Miss Luxmore.

Michael Dred turned to her with a sudden flash in his eyes.

"Why not?"

An enigmatical smile curled the lady's lips.

"He does not mean to be found," she said.

Michael Dred looked at her searchingly. But she said nothing more, and he turned away brusquely with contracted brows. As he did so, he noticed the white face of Beatrix peering between the tapestry curtains. He did not take leave of her, but passed out at once from the house, and hurried down the avenue on his way to the railway-station.

Lady Ormidale, also, was on the point of departure. Paul Wingrove was to drive with her to the station. He could not linger another hour at Luxmore Park Even for Lena's sake, of his chances of justifying by hard work and promotion his claim to her hand—he was bound to return to the *Berenice* without delay. And yet it was hard, bitterly hard, to leave her thus alone in this desolate, crime-tainted mansion—alone with a sister who seemed conscience-ridden, terror-stricken, and Mrs. Vayne, a woman who was not of her kin!

He drew her away from the hall, and through the drawing-room, into the little morning-room, that was bright with the warm light of lamps and sweet with the smell of flowers. He took her hands in his, and

stood before her with unutterable love and longing in his tired blue eyes.

"I would give anything, anything, not to be compelled to leave you, my darling. If there were only myself to be considered, I would sacrifice my chances of promotion, my whole career, rather than do it. I would stay at the inn here, and watch over you and comfort you as long as you stayed in this terrible place."

She smiled softly, sadly.

"You must not think of that, Paul. I shall be quite safe here. All the terror lies in the past. There will be none in the future—except the terror of black doubt, of constant, crushing uncertainty. But that will not hurt me."

"Not hurt you!" he exclaimed passionately. "Lena! It is eating your heart out."

She broke from him and walked a few steps away, pressing her hand against her temples.

"It is the thought of Beatrix that troubles me," she said. "Her strange look and manner haunt me day and night. And then this verdict—vague, empty, leaving us still in darkness—"

The young sailor approached her, with a deeper shadow on his earnest, handsome face.

"Do you realise, Lena, that it leaves me still under suspicion?"

She caught his strong right hand again, and clasped it in both hers.

"No, Paul, no! No one suspects you now. Who could dare to suspect you?"

"No one openly, but many secretly. Circumstances have been strongly against me. I have been mixed up in this mystery—that is enough for the world. My name can never be entirely cleared until another man is proved guilty."

A sudden fear came on Lena Luxmore's sweet, pale face.

"Paul, is this true? You are so noble to me, so far above suspicion or reproach, that I cannot understand the doubts of others. Will your implication in this—this calamity—injure your career?"

"It may." His clear, tender eyes looked full into hers. "I am going back for my examination, but I am afraid my chance is lost. I am two days late. But, apart from that, it may be that the *Berenice* will not welcome me. In the Navy a man's honour must be untarnished, his character beyond reproach."

"Paul! And you are the soul of honour!"

Her voice rang out clear and passionate in her sudden anguish of sympathy and fear.

She pressed his hand to her heart closely, convulsively.

"Are they blind? Can they not read in your eyes, hear in your voice, that you are as blameless and noble as any among them?"

"It is only for you I care," he hastened to say. He drew her to him, and held her in his arms, looking fondly and reverently into her face. "Only for you, my darling, because, to be worthy to love you, I ought to rise so high, to do such great things in the world. Oh, my sweet, the name you are to bear should be illustrious, glorious! And for years I have dreamed of making my name such a one that you would not be ashamed to take it and own it yours. At least I thought it should bear a stainless record—a record of hard work and bravery and unshadowed innocence; and now it is blurred, it is not fit for you—"

He stopped. The love in her uplifted eyes arrested the murmur of his bitter regret.

"Did I not tell you, Paul, that I would never forsake you? And if I hold you by the hand, how can the world dare to think you guilty of my father's murder? You say that the Navy exacts an unblemished name. Dares anyone to think that a woman demands less?"

Her pale face had flushed. A proud challenge thrilled through the tenderness of her voice.

The glow that warmed her splendid beauty, the fulness of her love and trust, the delight of holding her there close and safe in that bright, flower-scented room, drove all apprehension from his mind. For a moment the shadows fled, banished by love, and in that accursed house one room at least was free from the taint and the haunting terrors of crime.

"I shall not see you again for a long time," Paul said at last, in a low voice, "unless there is a trial, and they send for me. But I will write to you day by day. How long will you stay here—at Luxmore?"

"Only long enough to make the necessary arrangements for our going. We shall never come back." She shuddered. "I have a strange feeling that this house will be abandoned for years—abandoned and desolate."

Paul strained her closer yet against his heart. The moments were flying; he could not stay. He bent his face down near to hers—his frank, noble face, now again bright and hopeful, with the sunny curling hair lightly shading the brow. But suddenly his eyes grew dark and sad. He drew his head back, questioning her with his earnest, imploring gaze.

"When does Lord Mountstuart leave here?"

"To-night—at once," she answered.

"He leaves the house at once—yes. But when does he leave the neighbourhood?"

"He goes to-night," Lena repeated in surprise. "Why, dear? What troubles you?"

"He loves you, too," Paul Wingrove murmured. "And he has position and wealth, an honoured name, and—and your father's blessing; while I am what your father called me—a penniless sailor—with the hand of fate set hard against me, and my love and hope beaten back and shattered by a dead man's curse."

Softly the orphaned girl put up her arms and clasped them about his neck.

"Paul, do you know me so little that you can be jealous, or afraid, when I have promised?"

A flood of contrition overwhelmed him. He bent his head before her.

"Forgive me—forgive me, Lena. I was wrong; I was unkind. But when I think of what you are and of what I am, how can I help feeling humble? Dearest, true love is always humble, always full of fears. Do not love me any the less for my weakness, for my doubts. Lena?"

"Yes, dearest."

"I had thought that soon after the verdict had cleared me I would ask you to marry me, quietly, privately, so that I might have the right to be near to you, to comfort you and protect you. Are you angry with me for the bold hope?"

She shook her head with a soft, sad smile.

"No, Paul; I know a good heart prompted it."

He went on almost bitterly:

"And now it cannot be. I can never hope to have you for my wife until the murderer of your father has been found and declared—not even though that time be years in coming."

"Years!" echoed the girl, in a startled tone. "Years!"

Her beautiful face had grown white and rigid again. Paul glanced at the clock.

"I must go," he said quickly. "We have hardly time to drive to the station. And yet, Lena, dearest, if it be right that I should go, send me away. I cannot leave you of my own free will."

"Is the night fine?"

She drew him to the window, and, opening the glass door, they looked out. All was calm and quiet now. There was no rain nor wind. But the night was very dark.

"It is not cold," Lena murmured; "but there are no stars. There is nothing to guide you. Paul, is it not like our lives now? We are groping in the dark. There is nothing to guide us but the light of our love and of our faith in God."

Her voice trembled as she spoke. She took from her throat a spray of delicate, hothouse-reared white lilac that had been fastened there, and gave it to him.

"Go now, Paul, my dearest. I have no need to tell you to be brave and true. And do not fear for me. I shall be safe. The living will not hurt me, and I am not afraid of the dead."

Once more he clasped her to him, and this time their lips met in a kiss that sealed and sanctified the bond between them. Then, without daring to look back, he went out from the room—out from the light into darkness, from the warmth and sweetness of love into the whirl and storm of life.

CHAPTER XLII.

HUSHED.

WHEN the last guest had departed from Luxmore Park that night, there fell upon the great house the silence that Lena Luxmore had foreseen and dreaded —the heavy, awful silence of desolation. The air seemed thick with the breath of guilt; mysterious footfalls seemed to haunt the empty rooms. Now that the crowd had gone, and the clamour of many human voices was stilled, one might almost have fancied that breathings other than human disturbed the unnatural calm. There was terror in the brooding stillness. And, outside, a stillness almost as deep enwrapped the gloomy mansion, as, dark with its unuttered secret, it stood in its hollow, compassed and guarded by trees.

It was long past midnight when Lena retired to her bedroom. The house was closed for the night, and the servants had gone to bed. After listening for a moment at her sister's door, Lena locked herself in her room. She had dismissed Celestine Boutry, and was alone.

With slow, tired movements she changed her dress for a white dressing-gown that lay ready on the bed. Her face was white and set as when Paul had left her more than two hours before. For some moments she paced the floor slowly, with her thin white fingers interlocked and pressed against her breast. At last, with a sudden, wild impulse, she flung herself on her knees by the bedside, and clasped her hands in prayer.

The minutes sped on. Nearly an hour passed, and still that beautiful white figure knelt humbly there. She was pouring out her heart in an agony of sorrow, supplication, desperate entreaty. The light of the small bronze lamp falling on her face showed it softening, changing from its stony calm to a tender, trustful sweetness. The wounded, suffering heart had found comfort and peace.

"Lena! Lena!"

The voice of Beatrix, wild and startling, called from outside the door.

"Lena! Open the door. I heard a shot from the wood."

The kneeling girl sprang to her feet. In an instant the door was opened, and Beatrix rushed into the room.

"I heard a shot just now from the wood," she panted. Her eyes were wild, and she trembled. "Lena, perhaps it is he—Reginald. He may have come back. Send the men to see—send at once, so that we may know. Ah! There it is again. Did you hear?"

Lena had heard, indeed. From the direction of the wood the report of a gunshot had cloven the deep stillness of the night.

"It may be poachers," said the elder girl.

But Beatrix shook her head.

"Poachers do not often fire guns," she answered. Her tone and look expressed a frenzy of terror. "No —no! It is the curse—the curse of crime—working among us still. What if it be Reginald come home? Lena, I dare not move; but you are brave. You have not the knowledge that I have to make you shake with fear. Rouse the servants. Send the men to see what has happened."

Through the whole house the alarm rang. The servants, thus roughly awakened, came in terror from their rooms. The only two men left in the house, Bell and a footman, appeared last of all. A sudden

flare of lights startled the blackness of the stairs and corridors. Lena Luxmore waited in the great hall below.

"Bell, is that you?" she called to the last of the descending figures.

The old man's voice quavered in answer.

"Y-yes, ma'am."

"Did you hear a shot just now—a gun fired outside?"

"Yes, ma'am, I—I did."

"Go out, then, in the direction from which the sound came, and see what has happened. Go first to the gamekeeper's lodge and see if he is at home."

Bell's ripe-apple complexion faded to greyness.

"Me go—alone—ma'am?" he stammered. His knees were trembling under him.

"Yes."

Lena's voice was imperative. But the butler answered, still weakly and tremulously:

"I dare not, ma'am."

"You are afraid to go alone? Then take Thompson with you."

At this suggestion Thompson, the footman, also shrank away.

"And leave the house unprotected?" he faltered.

Lena's grave eyes turned from one to the other of them, and then glanced over all that gathering of faces white with fear.

"Cowards!" she said contemptuously. "Get a lantern lighted. I will go myself."

She went back to her room. By this time Mrs. Vayne and Celestine Boutry had come out upon the upper landing. The Frenchwoman was talking and wringing her hands.

"I will not stay in this house," she was crying. "It is doomed. I will not stay here another day. Our lives are not safe. Poison first, and now shooting. I will go away at once—when the dawn comes."

"Silence, girl!" said Mrs. Vayne. "It is only some poaching affray." She came down one or two steps, and heard Bell shuffling along the hall. "Bell, is the house safe? Are all the doors and shutters securely fastened?"

"Yes," mumbled the butler. "We're safe enough in here up to the present. But I wouldn't answer for anybody as goes outside."

Mrs. Vayne, somewhat comforted by this assurance, was returning to her room, when she met Lena with her hat on, and a long cloak flung hastily over her white dressing-gown.

"Lena! Are you going out?" cried the lady housekeeper, aghast.

Lena nodded, but spoke no answer. Her lips were set in the silence of an unalterable courage and resolve. Her eyes had a light in them which told those who saw her that nothing would now make her quail. The servants drew back before her, wondering. They had not been nerved as she had been by the sight of a sister, frenzied with dread and anguish, urging her to go, yet clinging to her in the dependence of a nameless fear.

"I knew Reginald would come back," Beatrix had moaned. "I foresaw it. I dreaded it. Oh, I pray God it is not he that is shot! He is not fit for death. He would be lost—lost eternally!"

The wild words echoed still in Lena's ears as she went down the staircase. Taking the lighted lantern from Bell, she bade him open the front door, and follow her. Awed by her courage, he meekly obeyed.

Outside, all was now silent. But the night was clearer than it had been a few hours before. The tall elms, now nearly leafless, stood out gaunt and black against the lesser darkness of the sky. Calmly bearing the lantern, Lena crossed the lawn, followed at a few paces' distance by Bell, who started and muttered

at every tree-shadow that glided along the ground as the lantern light passed by.

"The shot seemed to be fired somewhere near the narrow avenue, did it not?" she looked back to ask.

"It's my belief as that was about the direction it came from," the butler answered. "But, please, ma'am, don't go farther. For the love of your father that's dead, don't run into danger. Whatever's going on, *we* can't do no good."

"Be silent, and follow me," his mistress returned. "I am going to the stables first. I hear footsteps; there is someone coming."

The footsteps were those of one of the grooms making his way to the house. Lena intercepted him. He said he had been aroused by the shots, and, thinking poachers were about, he had gone to the gamekeeper's lodge. He had found it empty, and he was going to the house for a gun before searching the wood.

"Bring the gun quickly," Lena said; "I will loosen the dogs meanwhile. They may be of use."

A few moments later the party of three, with two mastiffs accompanying them, turned into the narrow avenue, and thence aside into the wood. Here, too, all was now silent, save for the rustling of the new-fallen leaves under foot, and a night bird's jarring cry. Lena's heart throbbed fast, and yet grew chill as death. Her dark, dilated eyes glanced swiftly around her as she led the way.

Presently she stopped and listened.

"Hush!" she said. "I heard a sound like a groan. Listen again."

They waited. The sound of which she had spoken came again—strange, weird, almost terrible in the dark stillness of the night. It stopped, and then came yet again. It was unmistakably a human cry—a moan of pain from among the trees a little way beyond the spot where they stood.

"It's the head gamekeeper," answered the groom in a low voice. "He's stone dead." [Page 237.

"There is someone wounded," Lena said. "Come."

The dogs went first, followed by the groom. Bell, paralysed with dismay, lingered behind.

"This kind of thing ain't my dooty," he muttered. "I'm not a man of a fighting sort; and if so be he's a poacher, ten to one he's deserved all he's got, and more."

Lena advanced among the trees, turning the lantern beam along the ground as she went. The groom walked by her side. At last, in the middle of an open stretch of grass, they came upon the prostrate form of a man. He did not moan any longer. In the moments that had elapsed since his last cry had reached their ears, death had ended his sufferings for ever.

A thrill of sudden terror made Lena stop. She thought for an instant of Paul Wingrove. What if this dead man were he? The shock, the mystery, the guilt of blood that of late had tainted the very atmosphere she breathed—all these things combined seemed to steal her senses away. She leaned against a tree trunk heavily. Seeing her hesitation, the groom took the lantern from her hand and stepped boldly forward. She saw him kneel down and turn the light on to the white face of the man who lay there rigid on the grass.

"Who is it?" she asked, in a whisper of terrible fear.

"It's the head gamekeeper," answered the groom, in a low voice. "He's stone dead. His gun's not discharged. It's at half-cock—the cartridge is not drawn. Some poacher's done this before poor Tom had time to defend himself. He's been shot in the back."

"Turn the light on the grass around," Lena said. "Are there any signs of a struggle?"

The groom rose from the dead man's side and walked about the grass stretch peering into the

shadows of the circling trees. Presently he came running back, carrying a second gun.

"Here's the gun that shot him," he cried. "I found it at the foot of one of those beeches." He pointed through the darkness, and then, kneeling down, he examined the weapon by the light of the lantern. "This is no poacher's gun," he said. A moment later an exclamation broke from him. "I thought I knew it!" he cried, in astonishment. "This gun is Lord Luxmore's.'

CHAPTER XLIII.

A RENEWED APPEAL.

NEVER will those who were present on that night forget the confusion and horror that reigned at Luxmore Park after the discovery of the head gamekeeper's body in the wood. It mattered little that one or two persons, in the eager endeavour to reassure the others, declared it as their belief that the man had been shot by some poacher whom he had found trespassing on the estate. Poachers, as Beatrix had said, do not often fire guns; still less did it seem likely that a poacher would fire so near to the great house and the gamekeeper's cottage. And how could any poacher—unless, indeed, he were a servant in the Luxmore household—have gained possession of one of Lord Luxmore's guns?

The rumour of this second crime sped with the swiftness of lightning. Within an hour the whole neighbourhood was astir. In the darkness eager people hurried to the mansion that was now spoken of with bated breath as the "accursed house." The avenue gates were open; the servants were leaving in terror. With the exception of the butler, every single man and woman servant had refused to remain longer within the walls. It was whispered about that this murder of the gamekeeper was in some way connected with the great tragedy which had recently overshadowed the house. Here and there the name of young Lord Luxmore was breathed forth shudderingly. Had anyone seen him? Was it possible that

he had been lurking in the neighbourhood, and had done this deed to silence a man who might have betrayed him?

None knew what to think nor how to act. The paralysis of dread was upon all. They were lost in the darkness of the mystery. They felt the hot breath of crime near them, touching them—and yet the criminal eluded their grasp like a spirit. Who was he? Where was he? For all they knew, they might be speaking with him there in the torch-lit night, even grasping his hand. Alas! Why is not blood-guiltiness stamped now upon a man's or woman's brow, as of old it was stamped on the brow of Cain?

"Come away, come away," one of the servants said to Edward Bell as she passed him in her flight from the house.

But the old butler, chicken-hearted though he had shown himself to be, now shook his head.

"No," he said emphatically. "I've lived in this 'ouse and with this 'ere family for thirty year—which it is more than a 'alf of my life—and I'm not goin' away while there's hany of them left alive to serve as I've served them halways. No, Barton, go if you like. 'Tisn't for me to say, 'Stop and do your dooty,' or to 'inder anyone goin' as wants to go; though, if I may say so, these goin's-on do make a man feel a sinkin' about 'is 'art as is enough to give 'im a mortal hillness."

He had lighted a fire in the hall, and was crouching over it just as on the evening when Paul Wingrove had left the house after his interview with the old baron. Now, as then, he listened in the direction of the library. But now his listening was accompanied by straining looks of superstitious fear.

Dawn was just breaking when, forcing his way through the awe-stricken people who had gathered about the door, Lord Mountstuart crossed the thres-

hold and roused Bell from his fireside mutterings.

"Bell, where is Miss Luxmore?"

But before the butler could answer, a white-clothed figure appeared between the tapestry curtains.

"I am here," Lena's voice said. And then she came forward in surprise. "Lord Mountstuart, is it you? I thought you had gone away."

He looked at her closely. Her face was deathly pale in the yellow lamplight. She still wore the white dressing-gown that she had put on when roused by Beatrix's call, and in it her slender young form looked singularly beautiful and graceful.

"I meant to go away," he answered her, "but at the last moment I felt I could not leave you utterly alone, and I resolved to stay in the neighbourhood for one more night. I am glad now that I did so."

"This has been a terrible night," she said, turning and leading the way towards the dining-room; "a terrible night. I have wandered up and down like a lost spirit. The servants have abandoned us—all but Bell—and Beatrix is ill."

"From the shock?"

"She thinks it is Reginald who has come back and done this," Lena murmured under her breath. "Who knows? she may be right. I do not know what to think. I try to believe it is the work of a poacher, but something in my heart tells me otherwise. Lord Mountstuart," she cried, lifting her ashen face imploringly to his, "shall we always be pursued like this? Shall we never again know what it is to be at peace?"

The desperate need in her face filled him with trouble. The strain of suspense and horror was growing beyond her power to bear.

"There is one way," he said, moving apart from her across the wide room where the wan dawn light was struggling for mastery with the feeble beams of a

single lamp. His voice came to her low and calm, but deep with feeling. "There is one way, Lena Luxmore. Make your peace with your father. Do as he wished you to do—as once he commanded you to do."

"Lord Mountstuart!"

He came back to where she stood, and stopped before her, looking into her eyes.

"You are too young, too delicate, to bear this burden alone. You need a strong arm to help you, to protect you. Paul Wingrove's arm cannot be that one. Within a few hours, unless I am very much mistaken, Paul Wingrove will find his own life marred. And, if it be so, what has he to offer you—to make him worthy of you? I acknowledge his goodness, his personal worthiness; but that is not enough for the suitor of Baron Luxmore's daughter. Lena, let me shield you. Be my wife—now, within a few days, and let me take you away from here to some place where your heart can find rest."

He looked very dignified as he appealed to her there in the grey, ghostly dawn, with his tall figure slightly bent towards her, and his grave eyes fixed on hers. But she shook her head with a faint, sad smile.

"You are very good," she answered. "And if I had never known Lieutenant Wingrove I would willingly have married you. But if I were to do so now my heart would never find rest again. As for the world's condemnation of Mr. Wingrove, the more others make him suffer the more he will need my love and my fidelity. If others suspect him, my faithfulness to him shall give them the lie. There are none who will dare to think that I would marry a man whom I did not know to be honourable and noble."

Lord Mountstuart sighed. He did not give up hope, but he saw that it would be useless to urge her

further now. He looked for a moment in silent longing at the sweet, pale beauty of her tired face, and the grace of her now drooping figure in its floating robe of white.

"Can I not help you in anything?" he asked at length.

"You can help me by staying at Luxmore throughout this day," she replied. "I shall leave in the evening for my mother's jointure house at Cranleigh. Beatrix and Mrs. Vayne will go away at noon, but I shall have to stay because of the inquest on poor Tom Herbert, and, if I know you are still in the neighbourhood, I shall not feel so friendless. Oh," she cried, with sudden passion, pressing both her hands against her aching forehead, "I would give my own life, forfeit all the future that seemed so rich in promise of happiness, to find and bring to justice my father's murderer!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE STIGMA OF DOUBT.

At about half-past nine on the third night after his departure from Luxmore Park, Paul Wingrove walked quickly along Regent Street, upright, handsome, and free of step as before, but with an unwonted gravity on his face. His frank blue eyes that looked so straightly ahead had trouble in their depths, and his lips were set with a firm closeness which told of a heart within struggling bravely against fate.

At the corner of Vigo Street he turned and walked westward at a quicker pace until he reached The Albany. Here he entered, looking at the numbers on the doors of the various chambers. At one of the doors he rang the bell.

"Is Mr. Dred in?" he asked of the manservant.

"Yes, sir. But I believe he is engaged. What name, please?"

"Mr. Wingrove."

A few minutes afterwards Paul was ushered into a large, handsomely furnished room, whose walls were lined with low bookshelves, above which hung oil paintings representing for the most part sombre scenes. Skins of rare animals were strewn about the floor, and curios of strange workmanship crowded the tables. At the largest of these tables, which was littered with documents and law books, sat Michael Dred. His strong personality seemed to fill the room, and compel the eye to turn towards him.

He was in evening dress. His back was turned to

a blazing fire, and his face was under the radiance shed by a large lamp, which stood on the table before him. Paul was conscious of a change in the countenance thus plainly revealed to him. A new anxiety was upon it—a deeper gloom. The keen eyes, too, seemed more restless. Yet over the whole face there was a new light, a warm glow, as though the heart within this singular and gloomy man were throbbing with wild hopes and fervours of its own, independent of the busily-working brain.

He quietly laid down his pen as Paul entered, and rose to meet him.

"How do you do, Wingrove? Glad to see you. Take a chair, will you?"

His eyes studied the young officer's face, and read the trouble in it.

"I am afraid I am interrupting you in some important work," said Paul, laying his hat on the table and taking off his gloves. "But I am disturbed, anxious, bitterly unhappy, and I came here thinking you might help me. What are you doing now?"

In spite of the abruptness of the question, Michael Dred answered it with a smile. His features had relaxed a little, as with relief.

"I am always fully occupied. The case I am working on now is that of the Duchess of Belcombe's rubies. You have heard about the theft of them, of course? The case is a simple one, clear as daylight."

Paul, who had been about to sit down, paused with his hand on the chair back.

"How can you think of another case while Lord Luxmore's murderer is still untraced, and the mystery unsolved which is blighting so many lives?" he asked, in passionate reproach.

The detective raised his shoulders with a half shrug.

"What lives has it blighted?" he asked coolly. "Simply the life of Reginald Luxmore, who has

chosen to abandon his inheritance for reasons that he dare not state, and perhaps also the life of his cousin Beatrix, who disobeyed her father while he lived, and refuses to convict his murderer now that he is dead. I do not see that anyone else suffers."

Sinking into a chair, Paul leaned his elbow on the table and rested his cheek on his hand.

"I suffer," he said, in a low, constrained voice. He looked up suddenly, and added, "Then there is the gamekeeper. He suffered death."

"Bah!" said Michael Dred; "a mere poaching affray."

Paul shook his head.

"It is curious that the victim was one of the witnesses at the inquest—and the only witness whose evidence remained unexplained. There were no signs of a struggle, and he was shot in the back. It was murder—cold-blooded and cowardly."

There was a pause. Michael Dred sat gazing into the young man's agitated face.

"And what is the trouble which brings you here?" he presently asked.

For an instant Paul Wingrove clasped his hands before his face. The detective looked at them, and thought how strong they were. Then the lieutenant sprang up suddenly from his chair, and began to pace the room.

"The trouble is this," he said desperately. "My career is ruined. I do not belong any longer to the *Berenice*. I have left the Navy to-day for ever."

Michael Dred raised his eyebrows.

"How is that?"

Paul Wingrove quickened his restless steps.

"When I went back," he said, "I was not welcomed. The officers held aloof from me. And there was one among them—one who is jealous of me, I think—who insulted me with evil-intentioned insinuations. How could I answer him? How could I

vindicate myself? I have nothing but my bare word, and what is that worth? I am under a cloud."

"You are too sensitive," said Michael Dred, with something like contempt in his tone.

"When I inquired about the examinations," continued the young lieutenant, not heeding him, "I found that my name was struck out of the list of candidates. They doubt my honour. The admiral suggested that until I clear myself from implication in this Luxmore mystery I should retire on half-pay. After that, what could I say? I sent in my resignation."

"You were too rash," murmured the detective. The glow about his face had died away, and the sallowness of his skin was again apparent.

"Too rash!" echoed Paul Wingrove hoarsely. "Would you have me stay among them and endure the insult of their cold looks, or even retire, knowing that they despised me? No, no. I have done right to resign. I know I have done right. But none the less my life is ruined, my career checked. It is not for myself that I care. It is for Lena Luxmore. I have worked so hard for her sake, and now that past record is all lost and wasted, and the reward snatched from me by a blind, cruel chance! I am robbed of my hopes, of the joy of my whole future, am struck down even from the height I had already reached, by the guilty act of another man, a stranger to me—one whom, perhaps, I have never seen."

Michael Dred intently watched the well-built young figure as it strode to and fro in its unconscious ease and manly dignity of movement. His own face had assumed its usual expression of stony, feelingless calm. Paul went on hurriedly:

"If it were only the shattering of my ambition, I should not care. I can do any work, endure any hardships. It is the thought of losing *her* that is driving me to despair. If I had attained the greatest success

life has to offer, I still should not be worthy of her. And now—how can I dare to ask her to wait, to be faithful to me, a poor, penniless fellow, whose career is marred? I can't. I must let her go. And yet I love her so! I love her so!"

His clear young voice rang unsteadily. Michael Dred pushed back his chair, and, taking a cigarette from his case, lighted it, and began gloomily to smoke it.

"There is but one hope for me," declared Paul, drawing near again to the table, by which the detective sat. "The murderer of Lord Luxmore must be discovered, and the stigma of the doubt lifted from me. Dred, you are my friend; you must help me. If you have ever known what it is to love—to feel your heart's peace, your whole life's happiness, depend on the winning a true, sweet woman—"

"I have done my best already in the matter," interrupted the detective, in a muffled voice.

The warm glow had spread once more over his thin face. His fingers worked nervously. A contrast, his keen, hard face, lit up by its subtle, deep-set eyes, to the pale, earnest features and appealing, yet undaunted, gaze of the young sailor.

Paul leaned across the table and looked straight into the other's eyes.

"You have not done your best," he said accusingly. "You have been lax, and as a result you have failed for the first time in all your years of work. Why is it? Why? The dead man was one of your oldest friends. Grief and the wish for vengeance should have been enough to spur you on."

"Even I need something to work upon," muttered Michael Dred, rising and standing on the hearth-rug.

"Then there is this new crime—the murder of a witness."

"There is no clue to its perpetrator," said Michael

Dred. "There is the gun, of course; but no one saw it taken from the gun-room, or even knew that it was gone. At the inquest the gamekeeper's sister said she was asleep when her brother left the cottage. She heard no shots, and knew nothing of his absence until she was told that he was dead."

"It is horrible, horrible!" murmured Paul.

"The police are searching the neighbourhood," proceeded Dred. "The rumour runs that young Lord Luxmore has been there."

Paul sprang up. "You say you have nothing to work upon," he cried. "And yet this man's flight is in itself enough to warrant his arrest."

"I am waiting for instructions," the detective explained. "It is probable that I shall not have to wait long. There is great excitement in all quarters about the verdict. The public are dissatisfied. The newspapers are indignant. There is a very strong current of feeling against young Lord Luxmore. As a matter of fact, the Coroner's jury did wrong not to return a more definite verdict. They appear to have been biassed by feeling for the family. The Coroner should have advised them under the circumstances to bring in an inclusive verdict—one which would have necessitated the issue of warrants against all parties concerned."

"Does that mean that we should all have been arrested?" asked Paul sombrely.

"Inevitably," answered Michael Dred. "As it is, nothing further can be done until the authorities authorise the arrest of the person against whom the evidence tells most heavily."

There was a long, deep pause. Then Paul held out his hand.

"Good-night. I will come to you again in a few days' time. If you are not here I shall know you have gone after Reginald Luxmore. Meanwhile—"

He stopped.

"Meanwhile?" repeated Michael Dred questioningly.

Paul turned away.

"Meanwhile," he said unsteadily, "I must do the hardest, bitterest thing I have ever done in my life—say good-bye to Lena Luxmore."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE MESSAGE.

FOR several minutes after Paul Wingrove's departure, Michael Dred stood motionless on the hearth-rug. Slowly, and perhaps unconsciously, his hands had clenched themselves. His face was flushed, his eyes stared straight before him.

At last he moved. It was to touch the bell. A servant entered.

"Any word from Burgess, Thomas?"

"Yes, sir; he followed your instructions, he says, and arrested Cookson just as he alighted from the train."

"Good! I am going out. When Williams comes, tell him to go at once to the Falcon Club. He must be there at twelve o'clock. He'll find the man there who forged Sir Joyce Seymour's cheque. I gave him the fellow's description this morning. There's the arrest warrant, under the paper-weight."

"Yes, sir. Shall I bring in your overcoat at once?"

"In five minutes' time."

The detective lighted a fresh cigarette, threw himself into an easy-chair, and sat there thinking. His face was no longer the dull, cold mask it had been a short time ago when under Paul Wingrove's scrutiny. It was alive now with energy, with longing, with hope, and—strange to say—also with tenderness. When Thomas brought in the overcoat he handed his master a couple of telegrams. Michael Dred wrote a

reply to one of them, carefully burned the other, and then went out by the Piccadilly exit, and made his way on foot through St. James's Square to Pall Mall.

It was his habit when walking to glance at the faces that he passed. His glance was apparently careless, but in reality it was keen, rapidly comprehensive, and unerring in its accuracy. To-night its keenness stood him in good stead. He was making his way through a crowd of people who were pouring out of one of the theatres, when he saw a face, the recognition of which caused him to stop suddenly. He, too, had been recognised, and was greeted with the exclamation :

"Mr. Dred!"

He was confronting Miss Luxmore's former maid, Celestine Boutry.

"How is it that you are here, Mademoiselle Boutry?" he said. "I thought you were still at Luxmore Park."

"Did you not know what had happened?" cried the sprightly Celestine. "There was another crime—the gamekeeper was shot. We ran from the place in terror. I would not sleep another night within those walls, not if you were to offer me a fortune for doing it. I was glad enough to get away with my life. I abandoned everything else, even my last new gown, which was *une merveille* from Paris. I have forfeited my wages. But it matters not. I am now going into the service of a lady of my own nationality—a charming lady, with whom I shall hope to forget the terrible things I have seen and heard."

Michael Dred looked up sharply.

"Did you see or hear anything that you have not as yet made public?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," replied the Frenchwoman, shaking her head. "It is the fright that I mean, and Miss Beatrix's terror and illness. She thought the young milord was about. She did not

want to say so, but she cried it out to everybody in her delirium. Ah, what a love! I believe she would give her life for milord Reginald. She has been corresponding with him—"

"Ah!" broke in Michael Dred.

Celestine laughed in her airy way.

"The letters would not benefit you much, monsieur. I would defy even you to make them out. They are an enigma."

"You have seen them, then?" The detective's eyes flashed into hers.

"One only, monsieur. I found Miss Beatrix in a faint in the library one day while the inquest was proceeding. She had a letter in her lap. It had dropped from her fingers."

"And you took it away?"

Celestine laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

"What will you? I was curious. Also I thought it would be better she should not see it again, since it caused her such great emotion. Afterwards she asked about it lightly—quite lightly, as if it were a bill—but I could see the alarm in her eyes. I did not choose to give it back to her, nevertheless."

"Where is it now?" asked Dred.

"At Luxmore," was the reply. "I forgot it in the panic of coming away. Ah, what a night that was! The letter is under the paper of my dressing-table drawer. But it will be of no use to you, monsieur; you will not understand it. When a gentleman in love writes to his demoiselle in cypher, you may assure yourself that it is impossible for others to comprehend. *Tiens!*"

Michael Dred had disappeared into the night.

Early on the following morning his sombre, sinuous figure might have been seen approaching the avenue gates of Luxmore Park. The smoke curling upward from the chimney of the lodge was now the only sign of human life on all the Luxmore estate. The lodge-

keeper respectfully delivered over the keys of the mansion, and Michael Dred went on quickly up the avenue.

A bitter autumn wind swept down it, making the trees creak and groan. The house itself, standing in its gloomy hollow, looked repellent and already desolate. Its shuttered windows were like eyeless sockets in a blank face, and with a voice not heard but felt the grey walls seemed to proclaim that they had sheltered crime. Now that there was no human presence within to cast over them the cloak of its living atmosphere, the dilapidations that had resulted from the late baron's miserliness showed plainly in the cruel grey light and silence of the morning. Michael Dred's calm eyes wandered, perhaps involuntarily, towards the windows of the room in which the crime had been committed. Then, approaching the massive entrance door, he unlocked it. The heavy door swung back as if reluctantly.

He passed through the vestibule and hall, and ascended the broad staircase towards the room that had formerly been occupied by the French lady's-maid. It was a small room adjoining Lena Luxmore's dressing-room. To judge by its disordered aspect, Celestine Boutry might just have left it. Michael Dred went to the dressing-table, opened its lower drawer, and lifted the paper that lined it. There, as Celestine had said, was a note—the same that Mrs. Vayne had seen lying on the lap of the unconscious Beatrix. Michael Dred unfolded it. It contained the following lines, written in a hand which he recognised as Reginald Luxmore's:

"Ueided nodrap elrouper eirpeug nolenut ois rineva eivertov euqiulemmoc strom snoite suonis xued suonruop xueim neibtiares eciouq ruop zneib evassuov rine versap esonej siamajiard neiveren ej."

CHAPTER XLVI.

COLLATERAL EVIDENCE.

MICHAEL DRED stood for a moment with contracted brows and eyes fixed intently on this intricate jumble of alphabetical letters. But his perplexity did not last long. In the course of his career he had read scores of cryptographic communications, and this one presently revealed itself to be among the most easily comprehensible. Evidently young Lord Luxmore's object had not been to baffle detectives' eyes, but simply to provide against the curiosity of any member of the family or household through whose hands the missive might chance to pass on its way to Beatrix. The odd tangle of mixed letters and seemingly meaningless words was simply reversed French, and it unravelled itself as follows:

"Je ne reviendrai jamais. Je n'ose pas revenir. Vous savez bien pourquoi. Ce serait bien mieux pour nous deux si nous etions morts comme lui. Que votre vie à venir soit une longue prière pour le pardon de Dieu."

In English the meaning seemed yet more grave:

"I shall never come back. I dare not. You well know why. It were better for us both that we were dead as he is. Let your life henceforth be one long prayer for God's forgiveness."

Michael Dred smiled as he folded up the paper and put it carefully away in his pocket-book. What did these words mean if not the consciousness of guilt, and

the remorse and terror that dog the heels of crime? What other than this could they mean? And yet the detective's countenance wore a deeper perplexity now than it had worn while yet the problem of the mysterious writing remained unsolved.

For whom was forgiveness to be sought? For the writer or for his accomplice? The letter assuredly left no room for doubt that Beatrix Luxmore was indeed his accomplice. Every word of it spoke of something understood between them, of some gloomy secret which crushed them down—crushed them so utterly, so relentlessly, that they felt that the peace of death would be better than the gnawing agony of life. But perhaps their grief was not remorse. Perhaps it was wrath against Fate, which, by a serious of minor circumstances which they could not foresee, had laid them under suspicion, and prevented them from enjoying the fruits of their unholy deed.

Michael Dred left the room that had been Celestine Boutry's, shut and locked the door, and then went down the wide lonely staircase. How the thick carpet deadened the footfalls! Many a time, perhaps, it had muffled the sound of the poisoner's feet as he or she bore to the now dead baron the arsenic which, after all, had needed help in the achieving of its terrible purpose. At the library door the detective stopped. After a moment's pause he unlocked the door, turned the handle, and peered into the shuttered room. All was quiet there. The walls, the heavy curtains, the easy-chair from which the old man had risen or fallen in the supreme moment—all kept their secret still.

Michael Dred passed out from the deserted mansion, and, crossing the lawn, went down towards the cottage in which the head gamekeeper had lived.

This cottage was approached by a little footpath at the end of the narrow avenue. It was a small lodge of a single storey, with a window at each side of a porch that in summer-time was covered with roses and honey-

suckle. It stood in a clearing of the park, and behind it and all around it stretched the wooded portion of the Luxmore estate.

Michael Dred went up to the porch and knocked at the narrow green door. The door was presently opened by a young man of about two-and-twenty. The sight of the visitor appeared to surprise him. And certainly Michael Dred, with his yellowish, eager face, dark mass of hair, and sinuous figure, looked strangely unsuited to the awe-struck quiet of that lonely woodland spot.

The detective asked if the late gamekeeper's sister was at home. The young man removed the pipe from his mouth, and replied:

"No, sir. She couldn't abide the place since poor Bill have come to his awful end. She's gone back to Blythedale. Are you Mr. Dred, sir?" he inquired, unable to repress his curiosity.

In answer to the detective's affirmative nod, he said:

"Will you come in a bit, sir, and sit down?"

Dred stepped over the threshold, and was shown into a little parlour.

"I find there is nobody left up at the house," he said blandly. "I wanted to make some inquiries."

He looked sharply into the young man's face.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Have you been living here long?"

"I'm Bill Herbert's brother Dick," said the young man promptly. "I belong to Blythedale, but I came over on the last day of the inquest on his late lordship to hear what the verdic' was. Poor Bill asked me to stop the night, and I've been here ever since."

"Ah! Then I suppose you were present at the inquest on your brother?"

Dick Herbert nodded.

"Yes, sir," he said, "though I must say 'twasn't much of a inquest. Bill was but a poor gamekeeper,

d'ye see, and the Coroner wasn't so partic'ler. They couldn't make out nohow who it was as done it. Some made out as 'twas poachers, and some would have it as 'twere somethin' to do with the murder of his lordship. The verdic' was the same as t'other—wilful murder against some person or persons unknown."

"I know," nodded Michael Dred. "I have read accounts of it. As a matter of fact, I came here in the hope that your sister might be able to throw some light upon the matter. I understand that she was in the house at the time the affair occurred?"

The young man shook his head.

"Lucy doesn't know nothin'. She was asleep. She didn't wake up till 'twas all over. As for me, I was at the other end of the estate. That was at half-past one in the mornin.' I'd been down at the Luxmore Arms till after midnight. There was a crowd of the villagers there, talkin' over the verdic'. Bill had dropped in there at a quarter to eleven, but for some reason or other he couldn't stop. When I came in here, he was gone to bed, and I didn't see him. But he called out to me, 'Dick,' he said, 'don't go to bed just yet, my boy. There've been some o' them Bexham chaps about again. I see two snares set up at the far end of the park. You'd better go along there and have a look round. I can't go out myself to-night. I want to think. I'm mortal troubled. I'll talk it over with you in the mornin'. You can take your sleep out then, too, if you want to.'"

"So you went out?" said Michael Dred quietly.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you take your gun?"

"No, sir, Bill told me not to."

Michael Dred nodded. Dick Herbert went on:

"When I heard the first shot—there was two shots, sir, with a good time between—I was at the far end of the park, which is over a mile from here. I didn't even know the report came from any part of the

estate. The second shot was about a quarter of an hour after. And my idea of the matter is this, sir, that the first shot was fired to attract Bill out o' the house here, and that, thinkin' it was p'raps me as had been fired at, and knowin' as I'd nothin' to defend myself with, he went out to the spot where he'd heard the report came from, and then was shot himself."

"By someone who was waiting for him?" questioned the detective.

"I think so, sir—waitin' o' purpose to murder him." The young man's face had flushed a deep, dark red, and his eyes gleamed. "I wish I could get hold o' him!" he added fiercely; "I'd pay him out myself, without waiting for the law."

"Then you must think your brother had some secret enemy?" observed Michael Dred. He sat with crossed legs and folded arms, studying the countenance of the agitated young fellow before him. "Do you know of one?"

"Never a one," Dick Herbert replied, "except, of course, a poacher or two. But a poacher wouldn't hardly have took a gun to him. There be none o' that villainous sort around this estate. What poaching they do is only the matter of settin' a trap for the pheasants, or a net for the rabbits and hares. No, I never heard tell o' no enemy, sir."

He thought a minute, and then went on, with his honest, sad eyes staring vacantly out through the bottle panes of the little window.

"But when Bill came in at the Luxmore Arms that night, he did look awful white and troubled about somethin'."

"Yes?" said Michael Dred, leaning suddenly forward. The honest eyes looked into his subtle ones.

"Yes. I took him aside and said, 'Bill,' I said, 'what's up with you? You don't seem yourself tonight.' He said, 'No, I'm not.' Then he put his lips close to my ear; 'Dick,' said he in a whisper, 'I've

found out who murdered his lordship.'" Michael Dred started in his seat. "Yes, them was his very words, sir. But he didn't tell me any more, for some o' the men as were drinkin' began to talk about Master Reginald—my lord that is now—and Bill bolted out of the place, leaving his glass of ale on the counter."

Michael Dred's fingers were playing a tune on his knee.

"Of course, you stated these facts in your evidence at the inquest?" said he.

To his surprise the young man answered, "No. I was never asked. And 'twasn't for me to say anythin' that might go agen Bill's master—for Mr. Reginald is the master here now, you see, sir."

Michael Dred was silent for a moment, as though digesting this curious reticence.

"You did wrong not to tell everything you knew," he said at last. He added: "There has been a rumour that young Lord Luxmore was seen down here on the night of the verdict. Can you give me the name of anyone who saw him?"

Dick Herbert shook his head.

"No," he said briefly, "I can't."

Michael Dred rose as if to go, but lingered still, lifting his inscrutable face to the young fellow's expectant gaze.

"Do you know if Reginald Luxmore is a good shot?" he asked.

"Well, I once saw him bring down two partridges, one with each barrel, without moving his gun from his shoulder," was the reply. "Bill used to say he was the best shot on the estate. But you do not think it was him, sir, do you? Oh, no, I can't think that."

"And why not?" demanded the detective, with a satirical half-smile. Without waiting for an answer, he proceeded with his interrogations: "Do you know how many guns were kept in the gunroom?"

"Twelve, sir; and two others as were old-fashioned. The one as killed poor Bill was a light one."

"A gun that the late Lord Luxmore was accustomed to carry?"

"No, sir. The underkeeper said as his lordship had never once used it. They say as no one ever carried it except Mr. Reginald."

"I see," said Michael Dred. "Then, if Mr. Reginald went into the gunroom stealthily in search of a weapon, he would naturally pick that particular gun out from the rack?"

"I never thought of that," gloomily muttered Herbert. "But it do look like it, don't it?"

After a few more inquiries, Michael Dred took up his umbrella and strolled out, slipping a sovereign into the young man's hand.

At Luxmore railway station the detective entered into conversation with the stationmaster. Some information he thus casually picked up appeared to be satisfactory to him, for when the London train drew up beside the platform, and he walked away to his compartment, there was a little, scarcely perceptible smile upon his lips, such as had not been there for a long time. Before leaving the station he sent off a telegram. Whether it was in consequence of this telegram, or from information derived from other sources, the authorities directing the investigation of the Luxmore case appeared to have awakened to activity. When Michael Dred entered his chambers in the Albany he found some official papers lying on his bureau.

"So it has come at last," he murmured, taking up a severely legal document, and glancing over its contents. "I suppose I must start at once. But there is something else I have to do first."

Taking off his gloves, he sat down, and quickly wrote and directed a note. Then he hastily referred to a railway guide. Without waiting to take any lunch, he drove off in a hansom to Liverpool Street, and started thence by rail for the station nearest to Cranleigh Hall.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE SHADOWS DEEPEN.

THE afternoon light was growing dim in the drawing-room at Cranleigh Hall when Mrs. Vayne entered suddenly and brusquely, disturbing Lena Luxmore's thoughts. Lena was sitting alone by the fire of sea-logs. She was leaning back in her chair wearily, a beautiful, graceful figure, with the blackness of her clothing relieved by mauve chrysanthemums at her throat and waist. The entrance of Mrs. Vayne appeared to surprise her. Looking up, she saw that the lady housekeeper's face was singularly pale and her manner perturbed. Even her rich silk gown seemed to tremble and shimmer with agitation.

"What is it?" asked the girl in alarm. "Has anything happened? Is Beatrix worse?"

Mrs. Vayne shook her head. She had not seated herself, but stood facing Lena, yet with an unsettled, wandering gaze that strayed about the room as she spoke.

"No. The trouble this time concerns myself only. I must go away. My brother's wife is dead, and my brother wishes me to go to him at once. I shall probably stay with him on account of the children."

Lena looked up surprised.

"I didn't know you had a brother," she said wonderingly. "How is it that you have never mentioned him before?"

"He and I quarrelled," was the quick rejoinder. But her voice seemed forced and strained. "We have not

seen each other for twenty years. That is all the more reason why I must go to him now—at once. It is very hard for me to leave you, especially at this time. But I have no alternative."

The surprise had not died out of Lena's eyes. But she asked quietly:

"When do you go?"

"In an hour's time. That is, if the arrangement will not inconvenience you."

Lena shook her head.

"And you think you will never come back?"

"I am afraid not. I owe a duty to you and dear Beatrix, certainly, but one's first duty is always to one's own. I cannot leave my brother's household without a mistress. And it is in the first hours of their loss that the orphaned children will need me most."

Lena was silent. She wondered why she felt no sadness at the prospect of Mrs. Vayne's departure. This woman, who was going away, had been with them since they were small children. She had come to them soon after Beatrix's birth, and yet they would see her go without a single feeling of regret.

Mrs. Vayne had quitted the room as hastily as she entered it. Lena, left alone again, began to think of her sister. Beatrix was ill. The doctor who was attending her could not, or would not, say what her illness was. The young girl was simply growing weaker and weaker, preyed upon, there could be no doubt, by some unrevealed terror or grief. Night after night Lena lay awake, pondering what this canker could be that thus was eating away her sister's peace. That Beatrix had had any share in deliberately causing their father's death Lena never for one moment thought possible. She would not let the possibility enter her oppressed heart. What, then, was it that was striking at the root of the young girl's life?

Lena sat thinking, with her blue-grey eyes vacantly watching the small blue flames that curled about the burning sea-logs. Their light illumined the large room more and more as the light of the outer day waned. Presently a commotion in the hall, as of someone arriving, disturbed her a second time. She raised her head and listened, and a sweet hope thrilled through her. Could it be Paul?

It was he. He had been told that she was there alone, and he entered unannounced, closing the door behind him.

"Paul! Oh, this is more than I had hoped for! How did you get leave again so soon?"

Her glad voice rang with a new life in it. New life seemed to be in her limbs also as she sprang up from her chair and crossed the floor to meet him.

Without a word he took her in his arms. For several moments he held her there, clasped close to him. The mingled fireglow and wan daylight on her face showed it to be pale and sad. At last he led her back towards the seat from which she had risen.

"Don't be so happy, my darling," he murmured. "Your happy voice breaks my heart. I have come only to say good-bye."

"Good-bye?" she repeated questioningly. "Why? Are you going away? Is the *Berenice*—"

She stopped, her words arrested by his look.

"Where the *Berenice* goes cannot affect me henceforward," he said softly, yet with a poignant regret in his tone that sent a sharp pain through her heart.

She partly guessed the truth now. The blood ebbed from her cheeks. She sank into her chair, and, holding his hand, looked up at him as he stood on the hearth-rug with his elbow resting on the mantelpiece, and his forehead supported by his open palm.

"Paul, dearest, what is it that has happened? Is it what we had foreseen? Have you left the ship?"

"Yes."

"They have dismissed you?"

"Not exactly," he answered, in a low voice. "But they had struck my name from the list of candidates for promotion, and some fellows on the ship spoke to me in a way I couldn't bear, so I resigned. I couldn't help it, Lena," he said passionately, turning to her. "The sacrifice was hard. But not for anything in the world could I stay there to endure averted looks, insulting silences or words, hints, half smiles more insulting still. You would not wish it, would you?"

"No," she said proudly, indignantly. Her changing, shadowful eyes looked black in her burning scorn. But her voice, when she spoke again, was soft and tender.

"What does it matter?" she murmured. And her small hand caressed his, that was rigid and cold. Seeing that he remained silent, she rose and put her arm about his neck, drawing his face down to her own. "We still have our love. And what is love worth if it cannot atone for the world's injustice? Paul, dearest, it can atone—and it shall!"

"You forget," said the young lieutenant unsteadily. "I am not fit for you now. I have come here resolved to part from you."

"Paul!"

"Yes, dear—to part from you. Lena, listen!" He drew her closer to him, and spoke in a low, quick voice, looking down the while into her troubled eyes. "Listen for your own sake. Life is all changed for me, my darling. My career is ruined. My hopes, my ambitions, are all shattered. And even when I was full of hope, when the future was bright with promise for me—even then, Lena, I never dared to think I was worthy to love you. I only felt that I might become so if I worked hard and lived nobly. And I have lived nobly, my dear one. I can solemnly tell you now, and you will always remember it, that, ever since I have known what the right is, I have striven

to act and think rightly. I have felt that my dead father watched me from heaven. And, during these last years, there has been you to win, to prepare my heart for."

"Paul, you have won me!" cried the startled, anxious girl. A sudden dread of the future had come to her, chilling her blood. "You have won me for all eternity!" she repeated, with a ring that was like terror in her voice.

"Hush, dearest!" His fingers tightened their clasp of hers. "Listen yet. I want to tell you all—how much I have loved you and worked to win you, and tried to gain some outward honour that should make my name worthy your bearing—so that, afterwards, in years to come, you may think of me without bitterness or blame, and perhaps with tenderness and pity. I want you to understand how hopefully I have done my duty, with your face, like a star in the distance, guiding me, leading me on, shining down promise upon me. For you every command that I gave, every order that I obeyed, every stormy midnight watch—" His voice trembled and grew hoarse, as if he were holding back sobs. "I have set my whole life to the music of your beauty, your goodness, your sweet influence," he cried wildly, bitterly; "and now I have lost all. If I worked from this moment until the hour of my death, it would avail me nothing. I should never be able to retrieve my position, to lift myself again to you."

"Paul, you are higher than I—higher and better in every way." Lena's pale lips were so near his own that he felt her warm breath upon his face. "I will not hear you speak against yourself; you are in a dark mood, but it will pass away. The sun will shine for us again. Forget the world," she panted eagerly, soothingly. "Let us remember only our love."

He shook his head, with a faint, sad smile.

"For your own sake, I cannot, I dare not," he said.

And he lifted his pale, worn face, as if to draw himself away from the spell of her pleading gaze. "Dearest, you must not ask me. Your love is the only bright thing that is left me now in life. Your eyes are the only eyes that welcome me, and the only home I have is at your side. So you must not tempt me to stay, my beloved one, when my duty is to renounce you, to go—"

"To renounce!" she interrupted, in a dazed tone. She withdrew herself from his arms, and stood before him wondering, fear-stricken, and yet expectant.

"Yes, to renounce," he repeated, in a voice that he struggled to make firm. "If I were not worthy of you before, when joy and light were about us, and the future was golden, how can I dare to hold you to your promise now? I am very poor. I have nothing except what I shall earn somehow, day by day. My name has a ban upon it. I am friendless, homeless, despairing. There is scarcely a labourer in the fields, even a beggar in the street, who is not worthier of you than I."

Again her hand was on his shoulder, her eyes were seeking his.

"Paul! Paul, dearest, look at me."

But he dared not look. The sight of her beauty, the anguish in her eyes, might take his strength away.

"No—no," he murmured. "It is my duty to leave you, my darling. Don't tempt me from it. I am doing what is right, and what your father would wish. We must obey the dead. It will be well for you to marry Lord Mountstuart. He is a good man. He will make your life happy—your sweet life that was to have been mine!"

His voice broke utterly. Turning aside he rested his bowed forehead against the hard edge of the sculptured mantelpiece.

"I think my heart will break," he murmured after a pause. "People have called me brave, but I am not

brave now. To part from you is harder than to battle against storms and the sea. It is harder, I think, than even death would be. What have I done that I cannot have you with me to brighten my life, to lead me in the right way? What sin have I committed that I must sacrifice the only blessing that is left me?"

The low, bitter cry had scarcely left his when the voice that he loved came in answer.

"Paul, do you want to bring me to despair? It is you—you alone—that I want. When you say that for my sake we must part, do you think that you would be the only one to suffer by that parting? Because your life has been wrecked, will you also wreck mine?"

He lifted his face quickly. Something of the old brightness had come upon it; a gleam of the old glad light illumined his frank blue eyes.

"Would it wreck yours, indeed—for ever and ever?" he asked gravely.

"Yes—for ever and ever." She put out her hands to him. "Paul, it was to you I pledged myself, not to your worldly reputation and success. If the world is harsh to you, then is it not my duty to comfort you? Did you wrong me so much as to think that I loved you for the days of sunshine only?"

"But, Lena, I have nothing—nothing!"

"You have your own true heart," she rejoined softly. "And a true heart—a heart whose innermost thoughts a woman might read without fear or pain—is more, far more, than most men have to give. What does it matter that you are poor? I have enough for us both. And, by and by, this cloud of doubt will be cleared from your name. You will go back to the Navy, and they shall own your record an untarnished one. Yes, and you will win a new record, honourable and brilliant as anything you ever dreamed of in even our sunniest hours. Paul," she spoke very slowly and

shyly now, and the broad white lids had drooped over her beautiful eyes, "let us be married at once—very quietly in the old church here—and then the world will know that I have trusted you—trusted you so well as to consent to become your wife while yet my sorrow for my father is new and deep. Shall we do this?"

For some moments he had been wavering. Now as he spoke, a sound that was very like a sob escaped him. Flushed, and with a mist in his eyes, he caught her hand, and reverently kissed it.

"It is such women as you that save a man," he cried passionately. "God is very good to me. What does it matter, even though I were condemned by all humanity, while yet I have your faithful love, your perfect trust? Oh, my love! my love!"

For a long time there was silence in the warm, firelit room. They stood hand in hand, looking into each other's eyes in that sweet communion that is too full and deep for words. At last Paul spoke again, very softly, very tenderly.

"I will not wrong you, my darling, by marrying you now. Poor and ruined as I am, I will be still your true lover, your betrothed. But I will not become your husband until I can stand before you and say, 'All the world knows that I am not utterly unworthy, that the touch of my hand does not sully you.' Lena, I will go away now, and, working each day for each day's bread, I will strive my utmost, with all the strength and resource of a desperate man, to find your father's murderer. With God's help I will find him, for love can do more than detectives. And when I have found him I will come to you. But if I do not come within five years"—his voice faltered—"you will know I have failed, and shall never come. Have you strength to consent to this, Lena — strength and courage to wait and endure?"

Her face was very white, and her lips were quivering. But she answered in a low voice :

" Yes."

" Five years shall be the utmost limit," he murmured. " It may be that I shall come in one year's time—perhaps even in six months."

Another silence fell. The firelight glowing upon Lena's face lent it a mystic beauty greater even than its own. The flickering beams played, too, upon his bright young head as he bent it nearer hers.

" Good-bye, dear," he whispered at last.

She took a single flower from the cluster of chrysanthemums at her waist and gave it to him. He clasped her for an instant in his arms and reverently kissed her forehead. Then he passed out into the cold world, leaving her there alone.

. . . . . .

When he called that night at the rooms of Michael Dred, he was told that the detective had started for the Continent in pursuit of Lord Luxmore.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

LORD LUXMORE'S EXPLANATION.

"CAN nothing be done, doctor? Would it be of no use to take her away—to the South?"

"No use at all, my dear young lady. She has something on her mind, and until that trouble is removed she will not recover."

Dr. Mortimer and Lena Luxmore were talking of Beatrix in the drawing-room at Cranleigh Hall one February afternoon. The specialist had been summoned from town to consult with the local doctor about Beatrix's condition The young girl showed no sign of any particular disease, yet she had grown gradually so weak that now she was unable to leave her room. She had become the scarcely-recognisable shadow of the brilliant, roguish girl who had sat with her sister in the drawing-room at Luxmore when Paul Wingrove had entered it on the day of her father's murder.

After a few more words, Dr. Mortimer took his leave, and Lena was left alone. She walked to and fro in bitter perplexity and grief. Orphaned, and parted, perhaps for ever, from her lover, was she destined soon to become sisterless also—to be left utterly alone in the world that for her had grown so dark?

Sitting down by a table, she laid her arms across it, and bowed her head upon them. Tears were stealing down her cheeks. It was not often that she dared yield thus to her grief, for the sight of tears or their

traces made Beatrix fretful. But just now Beatrix was occupied with a letter that had come by the afternoon post. It was a bulky letter, and Lena found herself wondering from whom it could be. Meanwhile the moments passed, and her tears flowed faster. Alone there, in the dim light of the February afternoon, she wept for the sister whose very life was being undermined by some hidden terror or grief, and for the lover who had gone out into the world to seek with the energy of despair for the mysterious assassin whose crime had cursed the Luxmore house and name, and was shadowing like an anathema from heaven the fate of the Luxmore family.

Suddenly the door opened, and the nurse who attended on Beatrix entered softly.

"Miss Beatrix asks you to go to her," she said. "She is very agitated. She wants to see you at once."

Lena lifted her tear-stained face and rose. What news could this be that had so disturbed her sister? What fresh trouble had come upon them?

She must go, although Beatrix would be troubled at the signs of weeping on her face. Quickly she crossed the hall, mounted the staircase, and entered her sister's room.

Beatrix was in bed, her shoulders supported by pillows. She had been too weak to rise to-day. She was partly sitting up, holding with both her trembling hands the letter that had reached her scarcely an hour before. Her eyes were red and swollen with weeping, and yet brilliant as Lena had not seen them since the awful evening of the crime. Her cheeks were flushed; her hair, escaped from its fastenings, flowed over the pillows in a golden stream, and her body, wasted and shrunken now to almost child-like proportions, shook till the bed shook also.

"Lena!" she cried, as her sister entered. "Lena, it was not he! it was not he! And the doubt of him

has nearly killed me. Oh, I bless God that I have learned the truth before dying! For the bitterness of the lie has been more than I could bear. I should have been dead in a few months more, and all for a mistake—a terrible mistake which my love for him should have kept me from making. Lena, read this—read this!"

She thrust the letter she had been holding into her sister's hand. Overcome with perplexity and consternation, Lena sat down by the bedside and read. The letter was in the handwriting of Reginald Luxmore, and it ran as follows:

"To Beatrix Luxmore,—Now that I have at last found a hiding-place where, as I believe, I shall be secure from all search that may be made for me, I write this letter to explain to you the reason of my going more fully than you may yet have guessed it. I have already told you that I shall never come back. Neither will I ever touch a penny of the inheritance that has descended to me at the cost of your soul and of my whole life's peace.

"I love you still. I have tried to overcome this love, to drive it out of my heart. But I cannot. All my better nature turns from you in repulsion and horror, but my heart clings to you still. If I did not love you I should cry out to the world my suspicions of you, instead of forfeiting my property and disappearing from the knowledge of my fellows in order that I may keep silence.

"For it is for your sake, not for my own, that I have done this. I could easily have cleared myself from suspicion. You can judge how dear you have been to me by this fact, that I renounce every earthly blessing and hide myself, letting it be thought—as it is thought by many—that I am my uncle's murderer, so that I may not be forced to reveal what I know and suspect of your guilt.

"I have been a bad fellow enough in my time. But even when I was at my worst, I believed in your goodness and whiteness, and reverenced you. And now the shock of what you have done has beaten me to the earth. Hour after hour I wander about, and pray Heaven to be forgiven for those talks in which I used to speak bitterly to you of your father. Can it be those words of mine—words uttered in the heat of passion and rebellion—that drove you to commit the awful act?

"In the dead hours of night I lie awake and try to find a loophole of hope, to remember some scrap of evidence that might make me think it was not you, after all—that your little white hand, that used to be lost in mine, is not stained with parricide. But there's none—none! There's not a jot of evidence that can weigh against your telling me you hated your father, and your silence at the inquest, and your strange manner on that accursed evening. When you came back to me in the drawing-room after going away for five minutes you were an altered creature. You were cold as ice and shaking from head to foot, and your voice, when I forced you to speak, was hoarse and rattling. You had been to the library then, and had left your father lying there dead. If you were not his murdress, why did you not give the alarm? Was the suddenly-dead body of your father so natural a thing that you, if you were innocent, should find it and come away from it without saying a word, even to me? And then, when your sister's voice cried for help you knew what it was she had found. You trembled, your teeth chattered, you nearly fainted—and yet you said, 'Go, go!' driving me out of the house. I repeat, you knew perfectly well what horrible thing it was that your sister had discovered in the library. And if you knew and yet said nothing, what can that mean but that you were the murdress?

"I remembered all these things afterwards. And your letters—the letters read at the inquest—confirmed me in my belief. Turn which way I would, I saw your guilt before me, impossible to deny or doubt. It was horrible, horrible! And not only horrible, but so incredible that I asked myself at first if I was mad. Parricide! The murder of a father by his child—and that child a girl! The thought made my soul sicken, my brain reel. And then something within me whispered that I had goaded you to it, that it was my passionate railing against my uncle that had first planted in your breast the terrible impulse of crime, whose fulfilment has lost you, cursed you, for all eternity. Only half an hour before the dreadful act I had spoken to you bitterly, wildly, madly, of your father. I had said—Heaven forgive me!—that I wished he were dead. And you knew I was on the brink of ruin—ruin that would part us for ever. And then madness must have seized you or a demon entered your heart. Oh, better a thousand times that we had parted for ever, better we were dead, or had neither of us ever been born, than that we had met that evening!

"Then a terror oppressed me lest you should be discovered—lest they should find proof against you, and publish your horrible guilt to all the world and condemn you—perhaps to death. I loathed you, I shrank from you—as I do now—and yet I had only one thought, how to save you. You know how I perjured myself at the inquest. I suppressed the truth. My one anxiety was to screen you, to cover up your guilt. I expected they would bring in a verdict against me, and to escape the consequent arrest and trial I fled. You were dead to me, and with you the whole world was dead. I did not care what became of me. I do not care now. I had and have but two objects in life—to forget all the past, even the very name of Luxmore, and to hide, so that the law may

not find me and force me to unseal my lips and reveal the secret of your guilt.

"The world is black to me. I have done evil things in my time—been wild, reckless, dissipated—but this guilt of yours is monstrous, unnatural, inhuman. It freezes my blood. Pray, pray night and day, lest some terrible vengeance fall on you.

"Only Heaven and your own guilty heart know how the terrible deed was done, and the reason that prompted you. Was it to save me—to avert our parting? Were you mad enough, criminal enough in heart to think that you and I could join hands over your father's corpse? Did you imagine, because I was not blameless in life, that I could become so vile as that?

"Great Heaven! The river of blood between us is deeper and wider than all eternity. If all the ages divided us two we should not be so utterly severed as we are now.

"Good-bye. If, as I have heard good men say, there is pardon for the worst sinner, then there may be pardon for you. As for me, my earthly life will be one long torture. I loathe you, and yet I love you. I shudder to think our lips have met, and yet I am crushed to the earth at the thought that we shall never look upon each other's face again. Even the sending of this letter is the act of a madman, but I could not rest until you knew why I have died out of the world. Your guilt weighs as heavy on me as on you. I could better endure to know that the assassin was myself than you—you so young, so fair—the woman in whom I had put my faith. I shall never bear the Luxmore title. I shall never claim the revenues of the estate. I shall call myself by some honest name that will not waken horror in my own breast and suspicion in the eyes of those who hear it, and I shall work for my daily bread and try to forget—until at last death comes to release me.

"REGINALD."

CHAPTER XLIX.

BEATRIX'S DELUSION.

THE last sheet of the letter dropped from Lena Luxmore's hold. Her white face was rigid, her eyes stared blankly before her. Then, as by a flash of thought, she seemed to become conscious that her fingers were empty, and she stooped mechanically and picked up the scattered pages. Her hands trembled. Her lips were bloodless as her cheeks. She turned her blue-grey eyes, wild now and full of dread, on the thin, flushed face of her sister.

"What does this mean?" she asked, in a low, restrained voice of fear and desperate supplication. She tapped the accusing pages as she spoke.

"It means that he is innocent," softly answered Beatrix, clasping her wax-like hands upon her breast. "It means—" Why do you look like that?" In spite of her weakness, she started up in bed affrighted at her sister's face. "Lena! Do you think it was I? No, no, no!"

Breathless with agitation, she sank back again upon her pillows. The loose gold of her hair was like an aureole about her small, white brow.

"Sit down," she panted. "I will tell you all I know. I can dare to tell you now."

Lena obeyed. Her face had grown calmer and softer. But the dread had not yet died out of her eyes.

"Reginald came to me in the conservatory at about six o'clock on that evening," Beatrix proceeded

feverishly. "He was agitated and in a passion. His eyes were hot and his face looked evil. You know how evil he can look sometimes. He talked fiercely and bitterly against father. I tried to soothe him, but he would not be soothed. At last, when we were in the inner drawing-room, I calmed him a little. I told him that he had brought his troubles on himself, and that he ought to reform. I said that if he loved me as he declared he did he ought for my sake to reform. My words seemed to touch him—strangely so, I thought. He got into a mood such as I had never seen him in before. He took my hands in his, and began to murmur words of penitence and promises to live better in the future."

She waited to steady her voice, and then went on:

"He said to me, 'Beatrix, if I can ever marry you I *will* reform.' Afterwards I thought there was a strange, desperate tone in his voice, but at the moment of his speaking I was overcome with joy. I had never seen him repentant before. And then the thought came into my head that I would go and tell father."

"That Reginald was in the house?"

"Yes, and that he was sorry for his recklessness, and meant to begin a new life. I got up and went to the library, leaving Reginald in the inner drawing-room." The faint voice quivered again and grew slower. "Lena, I tell you truthfully that I went towards the library with the intention of throwing myself on my knees before father, confessing to him my disobedience in meeting Reginald, and imploring him to consent to our betrothal on the strength of Reggie's promise to amend. I don't clearly remember what time that was. I think it must have been about twenty minutes past six. When I went into the library I found father dead."

A shuddering wave of cold passed through Lena's frame.

"Was he on the floor, then?" she asked brokenly.

"Yes." Beatrix's cheeks had grown pale again. "He was lying across the hearth-rug just as you say he was when you found him. I don't know how it was that I stifled the cry that came to my lips when I saw him. But I did stifle it—and I kept myself from fainting—because the conviction instantly flashed into my brain that it was Reginald who had done the deed. His agitation when he had first come into the conservatory, his bitter condemnation of father, his strange manner since and wild talk—all convinced me that he was the murderer. Lena, I cannot tell you what agony of mind I endured in that moment. I have wondered since how I lived through it. I know that clear through all the horror and anguish came the thought, 'I must screen him. The world must not know he did it, or even that he was in the house to-night.'"

Her eyes dilated with remembered horror. Lena had caught her hand, and was holding it tightly as if to force the truth from her.

"I went out of the room backwards. I dared not take my eyes off the body. It looked so awful in the firelight. I shut the door softly behind me. There was no light in the hall. I had already told Bell not to light up early, because I did not want Reginald's presence to be discovered—"

"And you denied having given Bell that order!" broke in Lena reproachfully.

"How could I help it?" panted Beatrix. "I wanted to save Reginald, and to save him I was forced to hide the truth about that night. I crossed the hall like one frozen. My limbs were stiff, so that I could hardly move them, and I was cold as ice. When I got back to the drawing-room I could not speak a word. I felt that if I told him I had discovered his crime I should break out into cries which would rouse the house. I shrank from him. I could not

bear the touch of his hand or the sound of his voice. It was only by an effort that I could bear to be in the same room with him. And yet—love is so strange—I could have sacrificed my life to shield him."

She went on in a tone that was almost a whisper:

"We, who had been talking as lovers, stood there silent and frozen, like two statues, until your cry reached us. Then I pushed him forward, urging him to hurry away. I did not tell him why. I thought he knew as well as I what that cry of alarm boded. What a mistake—what a hideous mistake!"

The pressure of Lena's hand on hers grew closer. Lena bent forward, searching her sister's eyes.

"And the empty wineglass? Did you bring that out of the library?"

Beatrix shook her head.

"I did not touch it," she answered simply. "I know nothing of it." There was truth in the ring of her voice.

Lena sank back with a sigh.

"And ever since then I have thought him the assassin," panted Beatrix. "It is that belief which has been killing me. I thought I held his life in my hand. I knew no other than myself could betray him. I perjured myself to save him, and every hour of the day and night, I have been torn between my father's claim of vengeance against his murderer and my own love for that murderer. I used to think sometimes that father's spirit was crying to me. Oh, it has been terrible to bear, terrible beyond telling! And all the while—how strange it is!—Reginald has been suffering in the same way about me. All the terror that belief in his guilt made me show, he took to be signs of guilt in me. He thought—that I had murdered my own father—"

Her voice died in her throat. She lay back, drawing short, quick, shuddering breaths of pain. Lena

sat quite still. Her hands were clasped on her knee, and her face was like a face of stone.

For a long time there was silence. Then Beatrix started up again, flinging forth her hands in a wild rush of relief and joy.

"We must tell him, Lena. I must write and tell him at once. And then he can come back, can give himself up if they want him—what does it matter now? He can face anything. He is innocent. And, Lena, —I think this trouble has made him a better man. And there is no river of blood between us. His hands are not stained. Thank God!"

There was ecstasy on her face. Her eyes were full of tears.

"I shall get well now," she cried, with a smile curving her pale lips. "And our future is not marred utterly. We shall meet again. He will come home."

"But you cannot find him," murmured Lena. "This letter gives no trace. His bankers have sent it."

"They must trace him," rejoined Beatrix. New life seemed to be in her veins. Her eyes shone, and the rich red was returning to her cheeks and lips. "And if they cannot do that, why, I will have all this made public, so that news of it will reach him, and he will come back of his own will. Even if I were imprisoned for perjury, what would it matter? The bitterest burden has fallen from me."

Drawing her sister nearer, she leaned her tired head against her shoulder.

"The number narrows down," Lena thought. And then her lips uttered the words softly: "The number narrows down."

Later on, as she was descending the stairs, leaving Beatrix asleep, she encountered Edward Bell, who was lighting up.

"Bell," she said, "I want to speak with you." She bent towards the old man. "It was not Mr. Reginald who murdered my father," she whispered.

"We know now that he is innocent—absolutely innocent."

Bell smiled sagaciously.

"Well, ma'am, if I may say so, I never could think as Mr. Reginald ever 'ad anything to do with it. People did say as 'ow he was about the 'ouse on that hawful night, which 'e didn't deny 'imself. But 'ow he could 'ave put that wineglass into Lieutenant Wingrove's pocket, that I did never hunderstand, ma'am. All I can say is, that whatever hevidence I gave at the hinquest was perfectly true."

"That's what I was going to speak of," said Lena. "Miss Beatrix now wishes it to be known that what you said about her ordering you not to light the lamps was the truth."

"Thank you, ma'am. It do come as a relief to me to know as my word is as good as ever it was; and I 'opes as people will now believe what I said about his lordship's watch, and the letter 'is lordship wrote to the watchmaker."

Lena had been about to pass on. But now she stopped again, remembering something.

"When the Coroner was summing up, Bell, you rose once and interrupted him. What did you intend to say?"

Bell thought for a moment.

"Why, ma'am, 'twas this. The Coroner said that when I filled that wineglass I took it straight into the library to 'is lordship. Now, that wasn't so at all, for when I filled it I left it standing on the salver on the sideboard. It was there, and no one in the room, for fully five or six minutes."

"Dr. Mazunda!" exclaimed Paul. [Page 283.

CHAPTER L.

FIVE YEARS AFTER.

THE steamship *Nerbudda* was ploughing her way northwards along the Coromandel coast. The day was glaringly bright. The delicious perfume of the Ceylon forests reached the ship still in wafts upon the wind across twenty miles of ocean.

Captain Paul Wingrove was walking the awning deck, where the passengers lazily lounged—the men smoking, the women dozing over their novels, the white-robed ayahs trying to amuse the children. As Paul passed by a group of dusky Orientals, one of these came forward and touched him on the arm, and held out his bronze hand in greeting.

"Ah, you do not remember me, sahib?" he said as he noticed the officer's surprise.

Paul scrutinised the man's face. It was a curiously wrinkled face, whose copper-coloured skin contrasted strangely with his bushy white beard and snowy turban.

"Dr. Mazunda!" exclaimed Paul. His face was alight as if with joy. "You are the man of all others whom I was praying to see. But you are very much altered."

"Time works changes in us all, sahib," returned the stranger, smiling and showing his yellow teeth. "You, too, are altered. You look sad. But I had not forgotten your name. I came on board at Colombo. It was there we met five years ago—ah, you remember?"

"I do remember," returned the captain gloomily.

"It is strange we should meet here," he added. "This is my tenth voyage on this route, and every time I have sought for you. . While we were lying off Colombo yesterday I made inquiries after you. Every other time they had said you were away, but might soon come back. But yesterday I was told you were no longer a resident in Ceylon."

"That is true," returned Mazunda; "I went back by the last steamer, only for a few days. My home is now in Calcutta, where I shall be pleased to entertain you while your vessel is in port."

"I wanted to see you concerning a matter on which you alone can enlighten me," said Paul, as the Cingalese doctor turned with him and walked forward towards the bridge. "You remember, of course, when I was in Colombo, six years ago, I attended your lectures?"

"Perfectly," nodded the Cingalese.

"When I returned to England I became involved in a very painful case—"

"You refer, of course, to the murder of the Baron of Luxmore?"

"Then you know the circumstances?" cried Paul. "You heard of the case?"

"Naturally," smiled the Cingalese, "I regularly read the London newspapers. I took great interest in the matter, and was much surprised to see my own name mentioned in the course of the proceedings. Your English physicians were clever—very clever, in their discovery of the *bikh* in the body. I had not believed that anyone out of India could so skilfully detect it. But they were in error in supposing that it is so little known in the East. Several of my own professional acquaintances are familiar with the drug. I have myself made a particular study of it, and it was, as I understand, by the method explained in one of my own privately printed treatises that your London analysts detected it in the body of Baron

Luxmore. Of course, Captain Wingrove, I knew that it could not have been you who took the poison to England. During the whole time that you were in Ceylon in 1871-2, it was impossible that you could procure as much as one fatal doze of the *bikh*."

Paul glanced up quickly.

"Why was it impossible?" he asked.

"Because there was no *bikh* to be had. Your ship, the *Berenice*, arrived off Colombo three days after a ship called the *Calabar* had left for England. A gentleman on board the *Calabar* took with him the only phial of the poison that was then in Ceylon. It was from myself that he purchased it. It was only a small quantity that I had compounded for an experiment. No more was prepared for many months."

Paul laid his hand upon the doctor's arm. His young face seemed to change. A fierce hunger looked from his blue eyes.

"Who was he?" he demanded under his breath. "What was his name?"

"A Mr. Wheeler," replied Mazunda. "He was, as I understood, a chemist. If you like, when we arrive in Calcutta, I will give you the whole particulars in writing. By the way, I have already given them once to someone who wrote to me at the time of the murder —a commissioner of police, I believe—a Mr. Michael Dred."

Paul seemed not to hear him. He had pressed his hand to his forehead, as though to quiet the workings of his brain.

"Describe Mr. Wheeler," he said after a pause.

The Cingalese chemist did so. And as he spoke the feverish longing of years died out of Paul Wingrove's eyes, and in its place came a calm, grave look as of certainty. At last he had found the clue which was to solve for him the mystery of Lord Luxmore's murder.

CHAPTER LI.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

ON the day after the arrival of the *Nerbudda* at Calcutta, Paul Wingrove was walking down the Maidan Esplanade in the early morning, when his eye was caught by a familiar figure hurrying along at some distance in front of him. The figure was that of a slender, sinuous man, and there was a slight limp in the walk. It was Michael Dred.

"At last!" murmured Paul. For nearly five years —ever since his farewell to Lena Luxmore at Cranleigh Hall—he had sought for this man in vain. In answer to his inquiries he had been told that the eminent detective had given up his work in London and disappeared. No one knew anything more. And now he came upon him here—came upon him the same apparently as of old, threading his way quickly along, and more upright of bearing. It occurred to Paul that the Michael Dred whom he now saw hastening on before him might have been five years younger rather than older than the Michael Dred who had sat in the dining-room at Luxmore during the investigation of the Luxmore tragedy.

The sailor's face had grown very pale. There was a look in his eyes that told of strange things passing in his heart. And all the while that brave young heart, so stern for the man walking before him, was beating fast with love and new-found hope. Quickly, yet cautiously, he followed the detective's hurrying figure. But his thoughts had rushed back to England

and to Cranleigh Hall, where his love waited for him still. Was she well? Was she true?

He had not met her since their parting in the November following Lord Luxmore's murder, the day after his resignation as first lieutenant on the *Berenice*. Not once since then had he looked upon her beauty. And yet in every hour of that time his heart had yearned for her, his hopes had clung to her, and his life had been dedicated to the task whose accomplishment should reunite them—the task of discovering her father's murderer. Twice, when the ship of which he had command returned to England, he had gone down under cover of night to Cranleigh Hall, and looked at the house that held his beloved—his betrothed. But he had never entered it, although his heart had been breaking to see her, to hear her voice again, to learn from her own lips that he was not forgotten and would never be loved less. He would never approach her, never even write to her, until he could do so with the knowledge that the stigma of suspicion which had rested upon him had been removed for ever.

He had told her that unless he returned within five years he would never return. In a little more than a month now those five years would be passed.

The thought nerved him to be desperate. He quickened his steps, but contrived at the same time to keep behind the other promenaders so that he might not be observed if Michael Dred should chance to look round. But the detective did not once glance behind him. Surely his errand must be a pleasant one, since he went upon it so eagerly.

Cautiously Paul Wingrove followed him. At the end of half-an-hour they came to a large house, whose verandahs were gay with brilliant flowers and whose columned arcades gleamed white among feathery palm trees. At the gateway of this house Michael Dred entered. Paul waited a few minutes, and then himself approached the gateway.

"It is here that he lives," he thought.

There appeared to be no porter at the gate. The verandahs, too, and the splendid gardens seemed lifeless and silent in the glaring Eastern light. Cautiously Paul entered and looked about him. There was no one in sight. Ascending some marble steps, he reached one of the verandahs. It was untenanted, but an open book on one of the lounging chairs and a cluster of flowers that had fallen upon the matting showed that someone had recently been there. Paul passed through into the room from which the verandah opened. That also was empty. He was about to ring for a servant to announce his presence when the sound of voices from the room adjoining made him withhold his hand.

The voices came from the other side of a light but not transparent curtain, and one of them was Michael Dred's.

Paul drew near and listened, his face pale to the lips, his eyes strangely bright. It was the first time in his life that he had played the spy on any man. But on this occasion the circumstances warranted him doing so. Human justice demanded it. The voice of blood that cries for vengeance gave him the right. The clearing of his own name and of the names of others unjustly shadowed—the happiness of his whole life and the peace of mind of his beloved Lena—all, all depended on his acting promptly now.

He stood by the curtain and listened. The voice of Michael Dred reached him, but soft, tender, passionate as he had never heard it before and never imagined it could be.

"You cannot guess how I love you," the detective was saying, "and you can never dream what the love of you has cost me. I do not love like other men. Love with me is all-absorbing, all-directing, maddening. It controls me, and I cannot free myself. Whatever it demands of me I must give; whatever

it bids me do must be done. I tell you, Victoria, since I have loved you, my love has been my only law. And this means more than you think."

He stopped, panting. And then came a woman's voice in answer. The voice seemed familiar to Paul, and yet he could not think whose it was nor where he had heard it before.

"But you have seen so little of me, Mr. Dred."

"I have seen more of you than you think," rejoined the detective. "I have followed you everywhere, have been near you a thousand times when you have not suspected my presence. I have come out here to India because you are here. Long ago—years ago—I would have told you of my love if I had dared. But there were reasons why I could not. You were sad, and I—I reverenced your grief. But I was near you. I knew where you went, what you did, whom you saw. What! do I frighten you? Why, I tell you these things to prove to you the greatness of my love. Listen! For these five years past I have thought of you in every hour of every day. I have worked towards you, schemed for you, planned how I might glide into your heart. The winning of you has been my only goal."

"But if I have no heart," playfully interposed the lady.

"I should not care," was Michael Dred's desperate reply. "It is you that I love. Your goodness or wickedness makes no difference to me. If you were the worst and cruellest woman living—if you were guilty of the blackest of crimes—I should not love you less. I have loved you ever since I first saw you, one summer day at Luxmore, nearly six years ago."

One summer day at Luxmore! Paul Wingrove made an involuntary movement. Who was this woman whose voice struck on his ear with a tone that he vaguely remembered?

He longed to draw aside the curtain and look.

But such an act would betray his presence too abruptly. A sudden thought flashed across his mind —could it be Mrs. Vayne? As far as he knew, he had never heard Mrs. Vayne's Christian name. It might have been Victoria, as well as any other. But surely Mrs. Vayne's voice would sound older now, less clear and sweet than this. He bent his head once more to listen.

Something had evidently been said which he had not overheard. Now the woman's voice came low and soft, but very distinct:

"If you think we shall be happy together, I will be your wife."

There was a long pause. Then Michael Dred said:

"Soon?"

"When you like."

"Oh, my love! my love!"

Paul moved noiselessly away, unwilling to overhear the tender words that followed. But the severity of his countenance had not relaxed. A few moments later the raising of the voices summoned him again to the curtain.

"What is it that makes you consent to marry me?" the detective was asking, in an odd tone of curiosity. "Is it love?"

"I cannot say," came the slow, hesitating answer. "It is something—some magnetism that I cannot explain. It surprises myself that I should yield to you. Since losing *him* I had made up my mind never to marry again."

Ah! A widow? Paul's suspicion as to the possibility of the lady being Mrs. Vayne was strengthened. He set his lips more closely.

"But you love me?" Michael Dred questioned, wildly, fiercely. "Tell me that you love me!"

Paul shuddered as he listened. Even in the love of this man there was something mysterious and awful,

a desperate yet sullen fury that made of the beloved one a victim rather than a queen. Never before had he suspected these depths in Michael Dred's nature.

"Yes—I love you," replied the woman's voice, half hesitating still. "But, beyond all, I feel that destiny is driving me towards you. Having met you, I cannot free myself from your influence. But perhaps I might have been happier—it might have been better for me—if I had never known you. There is something terrible about your love. It seems to shackle me."

"It is only terrible because it is strong," rejoined Michael Dred. "Look at me! Do you see how I am trembling? I have never cared a straw for any woman before, and yet for years this love of you has made me helpless in soul and will. Tell me," he murmured, in a low, deep voice that had again the odd ring of curiosity that Paul had noticed before, "tell me, do you care for me enough to marry me still, for my own sake, even though you learned that I was heartless and evil, and had done evil things?"

"No," the woman said firmly, though she laughed as she spoke. "It is the esteem that I have for you, and my knowledge that you are a good as well as a clever man that leads me to consent to be your wife."

"Then your feeling for me is not so strong as mine for you," returned the detective bitterly. "But what else could I hope for? You are a beautiful woman, and I am a plain man—a man whom most people fear and many hate. Never mind. I have got my reward." His tone had changed to one of triumph. He chuckled as he spoke, and then repeated loudly, exultingly: "I have got my reward at last."

With an expression akin to horror on his face, Paul Wingrove moved away. For a moment he stood deep in thought. Then he rang the bell.

The summons was answered by an Indian servant,

who started back in surprise at seeing the stranger. But he did not seem to think it necessary to make inquiries as to how he came in. Instead, he made a profound salaam.

"Did the sahib ring?" he asked.

"Yes," said Paul. "Mr. Dred is in this house. I wish to see him."

"There is no gentleman living here of that name, sahib," said the servant doubtfully, as he placed his forefinger on his brow. "Unless—ah, yes, yes, yes! One little moment, sahib. I will produce him. The sahib's name, please?"

"Mr. Wingrove."

CHAPTER LII.

THE CURTAIN DRAWN.

TEN minutes passed. Paul was looking towards the curtain, expecting Michael Dred to make his appearance from the adjoining room. But he came instead by the door.

Certainly, as Paul had thought, he did look younger than the Michael Dred who had superintended the Luxmore investigations five years before. Yet still it did not seem possible that this man—keen-faced, piercing-eyed, seemingly hard as flint and cold as ice, could be the passionate lover of a few moments ago. On his part, Michael Dred instantly recognised the erect figure and the handsome face—sadder now than of old—lighted by its fearless blue eyes.

"This is a very great surprise, Wingrove. It is a long time since we have met."

"Nearly five years," quietly said the former lieutenant of the *Berenice*.

They stood gazing at each other. Neither offered his hand. The detective's look seemed to be inquiring how long Paul had been in that room.

"I have been here for some time," said Paul, answering the look. "I have overheard your scene with a lady in the next room."

Michael Dred started, and his sallow face grew livid. An ominous cloud came upon his brow. But he restrained his anger.

"I believed you to be an honourable man, Mr. Wingrove," he said. He spoke calmly, but his fingers

worked with nervous rage. "I did not think you would ever stoop to play the part of a spy."

"I had a purpose in doing so," returned Paul steadily. "I desired to gain information, and I had—and have still—too much at stake to care how I gained it. There is no way of meeting cunning except with equal cunning. It is enough that I have confessed to you my action. You would never have known of it had I not been honourable enough to tell you."

"Do you know who the lady was?" demanded Michael Dred.

"No," answered Paul.

The detective's glance wandered apprehensively towards the door. Then it returned, as though magnetically, to the noble figure of the young sailor.

"For nearly five years," said Paul, "I have been searching for you. On the evening of the day following our last interview I called at your chambers in the Albany and was told that you had just started for the Continent in pursuit of Lord Luxmore."

"That was perfectly true," observed Michael Dred. He had sunk into a chair and was lighting a cigar. Paul remained standing. There was a look of surprise upon his face.

"But you failed to find Lord Luxmore," he said.

"I beg your pardon," returned the detective, "I did not fail. I fail in nothing. I found him."

"You found him!" echoed Paul, drawing back. "Where?"

"In France—in the foundry town of Indret, on the Loire."

"But he is dead," cried Paul.

The detective nodded.

"I know. I saw his death."

Paul stood silent, aghast at the coolness of the man before him. Michael Dred continued:

"He was earning his living as a workman in the

Indret ironworks. I tracked him there. He had wanted at first to set up as a doctor, but found that he could not do so without buying a practice, and for some reason or other he would not touch a penny of the income from the Luxmore estate. So he called himself John Welsh, and turned to manual labour. I found him out. I went to Indret and looked about me. They were sending off a great piece of machinery that day, and the whole town was astir. I loitered about among the crowd, and presently I saw my Lord Luxmore coming down to the quay in a blouse and a workman's cap. He posted a letter on his way. This letter was sent to Beatrix Luxmore. Destiny must have willed that he should post it then, for he was going to his doom. He reached the quay, where they were attaching the great machine to the crane that was to swing it on to the transport waiting below. He did not see me, and I thought I would defer our interview until his work was over. He got upon the platform with the other workmen, and the machinery caught him and crushed him. He was killed in an instant. If I had not been there he would in all probability never have been identified. As it was, I communicated with his bankers, and his body was taken to England."

"And the reason for his flight?" demanded Paul. "Was it ever made known?"

"I never heard it," said the detective drily, "but I presume it was his guilt."

Paul approached him, meeting him eye to eye.

"Whatever it might have been, it was not that," he said firmly. "Reginald Luxmore was no more guilty of his uncle's murder than I am."

"You appear to be well-informed," remarked Michael Dred, with sarcasm.

"I have need to be," was the quiet rejoinder. Paul had sat down, and with his elbow resting on a small table beside him, and his cheek leaning on his hand,

was looking straight into the eyes of the sombre-browed man in front of him. "I know now that you understand what love is, and that you will realise how desperate I am when I tell you that I have not seen the face of Lena Luxmore for five years, and that I shall never see her again until I can say to her, 'I have discovered your father's murderer.' Ever since I bade her good-bye I have been searching—searching—searching. Night and day I have prayed that I might be successful. And now I think the answer to my prayer is very near."

"It is not often that success attends the amateur detective," said Michael Dred, with an ironical smile. But the smile was forced and unnatural.

"Especially after the professional one has tried and failed," returned Paul, still quietly. "But I shall presently show you that there was a reason for the professional detective's failure."

Again the livid tinge overspread Michael Dred's face. Yet his small keen eyes did not flinch from the eyes of the brave young sailor. Both men felt that a struggle was impending—it might be a struggle to the death. Paul Wingrove proceeded in a clear, calm voice:

"In the first place, I am convinced that you know, and have known all along, the name of Lord Luxmore's assassin."

Michael Dred took his cigar from between his lips and smiled.

"You are very rash to hazard such a statement as that," he said.

Paul continued as though he had not heard the remark:

"I have ascertained from Dr. Mazunda that an Englishman, going by the name of Wheeler, bought from him a quantity of the poison *bikh* in the course of the year preceding the Luxmore crime, and took it to England with him in the steamship *Calabar*. This

Mr. Wheeler stated that he was a chemist, and required the poison for professional purposes. He is described as of the middle height, thin and dark, with a clean-shaven face, and as walking with a slight limp. Do you know him?"

"I have not that honour," answered Michael Dred.

Paul sprang to his feet.

"I know him!" he said, in a strong, ringing voice that echoed through the large and lofty room. "To my eternal sorrow I know him!"

"Then you had better find him," said the detective, but with averted head; "although in all probability he sold the poison, and could not now remember to whom."

"No," returned the dauntless young sea-captain, still in those ringing tones that echoed, and made the listener glance swiftly and nervously around him; "he did not sell it. He used it to poison his old friend—a man who had loved him and trusted him for years. And when he had done it he affected to be seeking for the murderer, and hid his own guilt by casting suspicion on innocent women and men."

Paul had clenched his hands. He stood there like a judge, with his stern, condemning eyes fixed on the back of Michael Dred's dark head.

"There is only one thing that still perplexes me," he pursued, "and that is, what this man's motive could have been. What could it profit him to assassinate his best friend? There was no enmity between them, no jealousy, no cause for revenge. What motive could the murderer have had? What impulse can have driven him to the deed?"

The soft noise of the opening door mingled with the sound of the speaker's voice. Paul looked towards the threshold, and beheld there—Lady Ormidale.

CHAPTER LIII.

A SEALED PACKET.

PAUL started back, amazed. Then his eyes met the eyes of Michael Dred. Each knew that the other understood.

The silence of that terrible comprehension was broken by the light, unconscious voice of Lady Ormidale as she held out her hand to Paul in greeting.

"How do you do, Mr. Wingrove? I was astonished when I heard your voice. I don't know why Mr. Dred did not come and tell me that you were here. Am I as much changed as you are, that you look at me so?"

Paul murmured something in answer—he scarcely knew what. His temples were throbbing, his eyes were dazed. But he was conscious that an alteration had come upon Michael Dred's countenance. The detective's fingers were clenched up. His eyes had a veiled menace lurking in them.

"Come to me again to-morrow—at noon," he said hastily. "But not here—this house is not mine, but Lady Ormidale's. Here is my address." He took a card from his pocket and threw it on the table. "It is not far from here. I shall be waiting for you at noon to-morrow, and then you shall know—more than you know now."

He glanced nervously aside at Lady Ormidale as he spoke. She stood looking from one to the other in silent wonder.

"Are you trying to evade me?" Paul demanded.

"Certainly not," said the detective. "Why should I?"

"It would hardly avail you now," returned Paul.

The silvery voice of Lady Ormidale again interposed:

"What is this mystery between you?"

"Nothing, dearest," answered Michael Dred, with a smile. He uttered the word "dearest" boldly, confidently, and with a lingering tenderness that brought a blush to her cheek. "I will tell you later."

Then he drew Paul towards one of the windows. The veiled menace was still in his eyes.

"Where are you staying?" he asked suavely. "Give me your address in case I have need to send to you."

Paul gave the name of his hotel. But he added significantly:

"Many people know that I am here. No violent measures would avail you. Dr. Mazunda knows not only that I am in this city, but also that I have followed you to-day, that I have seen you, and all that I have said to you—yes, and more that I have left unsaid. Should anything happen to me, he would at once publish the whole story."

Michael Dred smiled again. But his sallow features worked, and his eyes flashed darkly.

"At noon to-morrow," he repeated.

Paul nodded. Then he approached Lady Ormidale to take leave of her.

"I have hardly spoken to you," she complained smilingly. "Will you not come to see me again?"

"My ship, the *Nerbudda*, leaves in ten days," Paul said regretfully, adding, with a slight, sad smile, "I am no longer in the Navy, you know. I could not remain there after the—the Luxmore murder. But I will come to see you again, in a day or two." He glanced towards Michael Dred. "Yes, I can promise that I will come."

The detective's fingers were still clenched in suffering or menace.

"How is Miss Luxmore?" Lady Ormidale asked.

The handsome young sea-captain looked at her with sadness in his eyes.

"I have not seen her for five years," he said. "And one of the reasons for which I thank Heaven for this meeting with you is that your face brings back to me a gleam of hers. Yes, I will certainly come again, Lady Ormidale. I shall have a message to give you."

And then he left them.

Late that night, as, exhausted and yet restless, he strode to and fro in his hotel room, a waiter brought him a note and a sealed packet. Both were from Michael Dred. The note ran:

"Read the contents of the packet at once. It is necessary that you should read them before you see me again. All that in them is left untold you shall learn to-morrow from me."

Shuddering, he knew not why, Paul broke the seal of the packet. It contained a number of sheets of fine white paper, closely covered with Michael Dred's neat, precise handwriting. On the foremost sheet was written prominently for title, "THE TRUE FACTS OF THE LUXMORE CASE."

CHAPTER LIV.

MICHAEL DRED'S NARRATIVE.

FOR several minutes Paul Wingrove sat staring at the closely-written sheets before him. A kind of dread was upon him, paralysing thought. At last he roused himself, and, late though it was, began to read the narrative. It was as follows:—

THE TRUE FACTS OF THE LUXMORE CASE.

When I was first summoned to investigate the circumstances attending the death of Lord Luxmore, I was, for reasons which I shall give later on, extremely sceptical with regard to the theory—advanced by those who had previously examined the body—that the baron had come by his death by means of arsenical poison. I never did believe that arsenic had been wilfully and maliciously administered to him until the evidence of Dr. Mortimer and his colleague left me no further room for doubt upon the subject. My astonishment upon hearing that evidence was very great—as will also be explained further on in these papers. Having been thoroughly convinced, however, that arsenic had actually been given with intent to kill, I set myself at once to discover both the person who had administered it and the method of its administration.

My suspicions scarcely rested for a moment on Dr. Hale. In the course of my professional work, my principle, when investigating a crime, has always been to find where the strongest self-interest lies. In this

case I speedily decided that it certainly did not lie with Dr. Hale. As for the motive alleged against him by Edward Bell—that he was haunted by an apprehension lest the old lord should start Mr. Reginald Luxmore in medical practice in the neighbourhood—that was so utterly puerile and absurd as hardly to need any comment. That a worthy and well-respected gentleman should take the life of his wealthiest and most influential patron to avert so shadowy a possibility, was absolutely inconceivable. Moreover, Mr. Reginald Luxmore had not obtained his medical diploma, and it might have been judged from his manner of living that he was by no means likely to obtain it. As for the arsenic in the medicine bottles, the clumsy and conspicuous way in which it was introduced was in itself sufficient evidence that no medical man had ever put it there. I may mention that it had from the first occurred to me that it was a woman's hand that had executed this little manœuvre —for a manœuvre it subsequently proved itself to be. And arsenic, it may be observed, is peculiarly a woman's poison.

I next turned my attention to the butler. In his case also I found the self-interest deficient. On carefully considering his possible motives, I decided that none of them was weighty enough to have led him to take his old master's life. As for the matter of the watch, how could it be explained that the desire to steal it only came upon him after thirty years of service? Moreover, he could easily have stolen it without killing his master. The explanation he gave as to his possession of it appeared to me from the first to be the true one. Beyond this his manner was absolutely convincing in its truthfulness. The only really suspicious circumstance about the incident of the watch having been found in Bell's box was the mysterious disappearance, from Bell's coat-tail pocket, of the letter concerning it. At first sight there

appeared to be no connection whatever between that missing letter and the crime. Nevertheless, the disappearance of that letter—which had actually been written by Lord Luxmore—was the first link in a chain of reasoning which ultimately led me to the discovery of the poisoner.

My conviction of the truth of Bell's statements increased my suspicion of the evidence of Beatrix Luxmore. That suspicion was justified. Beatrix Luxmore perjured herself on several occasions. At one time my doubt of her was very strong. I believed that her order to Bell to delay the lighting of the lamps on that evening was the order of an accessory before the fact. I believed that she, acting in collusion with—and possibly under the instructions of—her cousin Reginald, had systematically been endeavouring to poison her father. Everything tended to foster this belief. The girl was known to have been rebellious against her father's authority, and to have been desperately in love with her cousin, whose suit to her —and, indeed, his whole career—met with her father's severest disapprobation. Both the man and the girl had strong motives of self-interest. They also formed a powerful combination. He, as a medical student, had knowledge that would be useful in the carrying out of such a crime, and she, as a member of the family, had the necessary opportunities of continual access to the deceased. That the case against these two looked very dark is also shown by the fact that the jury were on the point of bringing in a verdict against them, and by the subsequent fact that a warrant was issued for the pursuit and arrest of young Baron Luxmore. The flight of Lord Luxmore had naturally deepened the suspicion that circumstantial evidence had already aroused against him.

Matters that have since transpired, however, have convinced me that the whole fabric of seeming proof against both him and his cousin was based upon a

singular mistake. The implication of these two was a striking example of how, by the merest accident, incidents and events, in themselves perfectly innocent, may be clustered about a central fact in such a way as to assume all the appearance of guilt.

My preoccupation with these two led me for a time off the scent of the true culprit. It is hardly necessary for me to say that I did not consider for an instant the possibility of the elder daughter of the deceased having been concerned in his death. This possibility existed, of course. There was even much that appeared to support the theory of Lena Luxmore's guilt. These points were, however, sufficiently dwelt upon in the course of the Coroner's summing up. The whole character of Lena Luxmore was itself a contradiction of any imputation that might have been placed upon her.

In the matter of the arsenic, I did not attach much importance to the seeming implication of Mr. Wingrove—the person for whom I am writing this narrative. It is true that in the course of my investigations of the case I was instrumental in bringing to light many facts and circumstances which told seriously against him. My manner, too, may have been interpreted as condemning him. My reasons for this will hereafter appear.

Careful sifting of the circumstances left me with the following points clearly in view :—

1. Lord Luxmore had been for a considerable time unconsciously taking doses of arsenic wilfully and malignantly administered.

2. The fact that the administering of these doses must have extended back over several days, and possibly even over several weeks, indisputably proved that the poisoner must be a person who had free and continued access to the deceased—that is to say, must have been a member of the family or household.

3. The choice of arsenic as the medium of compassing death must have been made in ignorance of the fact that this particular drug was an ingredient in the tonic daily taken by the intended victim; therefore the poisoner was not Dr. Hale, the only person outside the household who might otherwise have been suspected.

4. The case exhibited a remarkable number of what might be called "blind clues"—such as the abstraction of the letter from the butler's pocket, the clumsy and indiscriminate cramming of arsenic into such bottles of the medicine as remained, and the putting of the empty wineglass into the overcoat pocket of Lieutenant Wingrove.

5. It occurred to me that these three "blind clues" mentioned above had a certain family resemblance to each other. They were undoubtedly put forward with the intention of misleading the investigator. The fact that each one of them tended to incriminate a different person was also to a certain extent misleading, as it temporarily diverted the inquirer from the true conclusion—namely, that they were all the work of the same hand, the hand of a person desperately anxious to keep up circumstantial proof indiscriminately against any and every person but himself.

6. First in the series, the abstraction of the butler's letter was to me most unaccountable—the more so as the non-discovery of that letter mattered so little one way or the other. I could only conjecture that the unimportant document had been stolen by a person made too nervous by the dread of detection as the poisoner properly to weigh the significance of what he or she was doing. I early discerned, therefore, that this false clue was only valuable as being a tactical mistake on the part of the true criminal. Apprehending other mistakes of a similar nature, I set myself to watch. By a series of covert questions, I discovered that both Lena and Beatrix Luxmore were totally

ignorant of the manner in which the furniture was arranged in the butler's room. I had put my questions on this subject so discreetly and indirectly—indeed, through the medium of another person—that I was convinced that their ignorance was real and not merely assumed through suspicion that the matter was one of importance.

After a lengthened and careful inquiry, I had come to the conclusion that the servants might be absolved from all doubt. There now remained only one person for my consideration. That person was Mrs. Vayne.

CHAPTER LV.

REVELATIONS.

FROM the very beginning of my acquaintance with her, years before, I had never liked the looks of Mrs. Vayne. I was always extremely impatient when in her presence, and I believe this sentiment towards her was shared by every member of the Luxmore family except Beatrix. I knew it to be a fact that Lord Luxmore disliked her in his heart. And I was also conscious that this feeling was the very opposite of the one she desired to inspire in him. In spite of her well-preserved personal attractions, her countenance, to a practised observer, was that of one in whom self-interest is pre-eminent.

I noted with surprise that, throughout the whole time of the inquest, she had kept herself studiously in the background. She was a very self-assertive woman, and this silence and self-effacement were not natural to her. I told myself that some grave reason must exist for this apparent change in her nature. I watched her. Within a very short time I had fixed upon her as the person responsible for the "blind clues" to which I have already alluded.

I don't believe that she for one moment imagined that I suspected her. To my disappointment, I could not prove that she had entered Bell's room on the day of the abstraction of the letter from his pocket. But I ascertained beyond a doubt that she had been seen that morning on the staircase leading to the upper landing, on which the butler's room is situated. From

a keen study of her looks and bearing—in which innocence and ignorance were suspiciously exaggerated—and from a careful surveillance of her quiet movements about the house, I finally convinced myself that she and she alone was responsible for the attempt to murder Lord Luxmore by means of arsenical poisoning.

I say "attempt," because she was baffled in her object by circumstances which she had not foreseen, and, in the end, was forestalled in the achieving of her terrible purpose by another and a swifter hand.

I will now set down her share in the grim work from beginning to end. The whole consecutive account was built up by me, as a theory of the poisoner's proceedings, out of such facts as had come to my knowledge. I have since wrung from her own lips an admission of its truth in every detail.

For years—indeed, ever since her entrance into the Luxmore household—Mrs. Vayne had aspired to become the second wife of Lord Luxmore. Socially, there was no reason whatever why she should not so aspire. She was of extremely good family, was the widow of a very distinguished military officer, and had always been accustomed to move in aristocratic circles. Her ambition to become Lady Luxmore was therefore not unreasonable. Although the attainment of her aim was constantly deferred, she did not give up hope. She believed that the old lord's hesitation was due to a dislike to marriage in general, and that as soon as he had made up his mind to marry again he would undoubtedly choose herself. Her rage may therefore be imagined when the news was suddenly sprung upon her that he intended to marry Lady Ormidale. In her revengeful passion—and foreseeing that this marriage must entail the forfeiture of her present position—she resolved at all hazards to frustrate the scheme. If she herself could not become mistress of Luxmore, no other woman should.

She procured arsenic, ostensibly for toilet purposes, and, a little more than three weeks before the evening of the tragedy, she began to administer it in small doses to the man who had disappointed her. Her method of giving it was to mix the white arsenic powder with the medicine in quantities minute at first, but gradually increasing. She watched for the result. To her astonishment, no noticeable result was apparent. Her intended victim was not so well as usual, but there were no signs that his illness was tending towards a fatal termination. For three weeks she continued her criminal work, wondering to find it ineffectual, and consumed with sullen rage that the man whom she now hated was not dead.

At last, two or three days before the dealing of the fatal blow by a hand more cunning than hers, it occurred to her that possibly something in the medicine itself was counteracting the drug she mixed with it. She resolved upon a change of method. Feigning to share the butler's alarm as to the effects of the medicine on his master, she encouraged him to cease giving Lord Luxmore the tonic. Meanwhile, she hoped the unneutralised poison would do its work. She now dropped it into the afternoon glass of cordial.

On the first day of dropping it into the cordial, she was nervous and the dose was small. On the second day—which was the day before the actual murder—she had no opportunity, as she has since confessed to me, to get at the glass. She did not venture to commit the imprudence of poisoning the orange-wine in the bottle. Moreover, my friend the Baron varied his cordials frequently. Mrs. Vayne waited, therefore, for the opportunity that would be brought her by the next day—the Tuesday on which the tragedy occurred.

I come now to the consideration of her movements on this day.

In the morning she and the doomed man quarrelled.

Perhaps something in her look and manner had jarred on him more than usual. Whatever the cause, he was irritable, and he announced to her sarcastically that her time at Luxmore would be short, as his marriage—of which he supposed she had already heard some rumour—would take place almost at once. Upon this she resolved that the arsenic given him that day should be double the usual quantity. At whatever cost—even at the cost of her life—she was determined to succeed in her design.

Her desperate purpose was simmering in her brain when in the afternoon she accidentally met Reginald Luxmore. She was afraid lest his going up to the house might entail some excitement or confusion that should interfere with her plans. She, therefore, persuaded him that an appeal to his uncle would be of no use. Probably she was right.

For the same reason—that she did not want anything to disturb the regular routine of the household—she was at first annoyed at the arrival of Mr. Wingrove. But as he went straight into the drawing-room, he in no way hampered her plans. She even began after a while to think that his presence in the house might be made useful in screening her from the consequences of her crime—an idea which subsequently gained in force when his interview with Lord Luxmore proved to be a stormy one.

Towards five o'clock she watched for the butler to enter the dining-room and pour out his master's usual glass of cordial. In her desperation she was prepared to come forward openly and send him on some errand to another part of the house, in order that she might be left for a moment alone with the ready-filled glass. But on this occasion chance favoured her. Edward Bell, quite ignorant of her near presence, quitted the dining-room for a few minutes, leaving the glass of orange-wine standing on a small tray on the sideboard, ready to be presently

taken in to the library. While he was absent, Mrs. Vayne slipped into the room and dropped the arsenic into the liquid. When the butler came back he found the glass apparently as he left it, and innocently carried it in to the unsuspecting victim.

Lord Luxmore was then asleep. Mr. Wingrove was still in the drawing-room with Lena Luxmore.

Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Vayne opened the library door and looked in. Lord Luxmore had just woke up. She saw that he had not yet taken any of the poisoned cordial. He took the first sip of it while she was standing there. She told him of Mr. Wingrove's arrival, and then went to the drawing-room to summon the lieutenant.

Immediately afterwards she went upstairs, and from the first landing kept cautious watch on the library. She knew that Lena Luxmore went down and came back; but she remained herself unobserved. At last, at about ten minutes to six, she heard Mr. Wingrove leave the library. As he went out quietly, raising no alarm, she concluded that the arsenic in the cordial had not yet done its work. She listened while he went into the drawing-room.

At four minutes to six she crept downstairs, opened the library door, looked into the room, and saw by the firelight Lord Luxmore lying prostrate on the floor, apparently dead. She stole across the room and sought on the little table for the wineglass. It was empty. She took it up, and, without stopping to look closer at the prostrate victim, she hurried from the room. Paul Wingrove, in the drawing-room, had heard the sound of her opening the door, and now heard the sound of her closing it.

With the empty wineglass in her hand, she glided along the unlighted passage. No doubt she held the glass with a frantic grip. She wiped it out hastily with her handkerchief as she went, and as she did so the stem snapped between her fingers. A fragment

of glass fell to the floor and was afterwards found there. Another chip of glass scratched her hand. In her haste and nervous dread of discovery the idea came to her of thrusting the broken wineglass into the pocket of Mr. Wingrove's overcoat, which she knew to be hanging in the alcove. She acted on this impulse, reflecting with malicious satisfaction that this disposal of the incriminating glass not only secured herself against suspicion, but would seriously inculpate the man who had only a few minutes before quitted the deceased in anger.

She had scarcely got rid of the glass when she heard footsteps approaching from the hall. She made her escape through the little door next the alcove, and thence, by a back way, passed round to the dining-room. The footsteps whose approach had alarmed her had been those of Mr. Wingrove coming to fetch his coat. The clock had just struck six.

Her first proceeding on reaching the dining-room was to light one of the lamps. With the anxiety common to criminals, she wanted to scan the sideboard to make sure that no visible trace remained of what had been done there—that not a single speck of the deadly white powder had been spilled and was lying there to betray her. She was absorbed in this search when Lieutenant Wingrove crossed the lawn outside, and, glancing in at the window, saw her standing at the sideboard.

It will be observed that her actual conduct carries out perfectly the statements made by various witnesses, and even by herself, as to her whereabouts at different times on that evening.

Throughout the excitement caused by the discovery of the death and during the subsequent inquiry she bore herself with an outward coolness which was little short of marvellous. She believed herself to be the baron's sole murderer, and yet she moved about the house and discussed the crime without trembling,

without paling, without flinching in any way. It was even she who despatched the telegram to me, summoning me to the scene of the crime. But, within, she was devoured with the fear of detection, and this fear found vent in wild and empty attempts to throw suspicion on others. She wanted someone among the innocent to be convicted in order that she herself might go free of suspicion. For this reason, she stole from the butler's pocket the letter which would have justified his possession of the watch. For this reason, at the moment when doubt was cast upon Dr. Hale, she mixed arsenic with the remainder of the medicine in order that the evidence against him might be strengthened. Partly for this reason, as I have already shown, she placed the broken wineglass in Mr. Wingrove's pocket. She was also the first to draw attention to the fact that Celestine Boutry had obtained arsenic from Paris for Beatrix Luxmore's use. It may be mentioned that her own supply of the poison was not drawn from this stock at all, but had been procured by herself by means which it is not necessary should be divulged here.

The day on which the result of the examination of the left lung of the deceased was made known was for her a day of intense relief and self-congratulation. Up to this time she had never suspected that a second person had finished off her clumsy work of slow murder. The revelation concerning the *bikh* overwhelmed her with consternation. For two or three days afterwards she went about as one dazed, with blank looks and uncertain movements.

I noticed this change of manner, and was impressed by it. I noticed also that she let herself go, as to a feeling of comfort and safety. The *bikh* part of the crime was so astounding and complex that she was convinced that the simpler matter of the arsenic would sink into insignificance beside it. She almost felt as if her hands had been washed clean of guilt.

The sudden flight of Reginald Luxmore confirmed me in a faint impression I had already received that he was her accomplice. On the day on which the official instructions were sent me to pursue and arrest the young baron, I went down secretly to Cranleigh Hall and had an interview with Mrs. Vayne in the shrubbery. There I taxed her with her guilt, and seeing that denial would be useless, she admitted it. She was not remorseful. She was reckless rather than afraid. I forced from her a full confession of the facts as they have appeared here.

When she had finished her avowal, I said—

"I am very sorry for this, Mrs. Vayne. You and I have been friends for many years. But my duty compels me to arrest you."

Her countenance changed with a rapidity startling to behold.

"You shall not," she said between her teeth. "You dare not!" And then she laughed discordantly. "In this matter, Michael Dred, you will find my will stronger than your duty."

CHAPTER LVI.

MICHAEL DRED'S NARRATIVE CONTINUED.

I WILL not say what next transpired between Mrs. Vayne and myself. As a result of what she said I forbore to arrest her. Although I knew her to be guilty, I let her retain her freedom on the sole condition that she should leave the Luxmore household at once and for ever.

She did so. She left Cranleigh Hall that same afternoon.

I now turn to the matter of the actual and immediate murder of Lord Luxmore.

Let me begin with the assurance that I tell this story as calmly and impartially as if I myself were in no wise connected with it.

It was about two years before the murder, when, going down to Luxmore to stay for a few days with my dear friend the baron, I found among the house-party Lord and Lady Ormidale. I think I may say that from the first moment of beholding Lady Ormidale I realised that she was born to exercise a special fascination upon me. This was the more singular in that I had never previously been at all susceptible to the charms of women.

Lady Ormidale, however, was married; so I contented myself with cultivating her friendship. At the end of a year her husband died. I was then in India. I immediately set myself as a goal the winning of the newly-made widow. Out of respect for her feelings I deferred pleading my suit with her.

But I watched her. I found that Lord Luxmore called frequently at her house. On casually alluding to these visits, I learned from her that she had already promised to become the second Lady Luxmore. I was forestalled, and by a friend so near and intimate that probably this affair of the heart was the only matter that he had ever withheld from me.

After this I paid him frequent visits, in the course of which I endeavoured to argue him out of his matrimonial scheme. But the old man was madly in love, and would not listen to me. He never suspected my reasons for seeking thus to turn him from his project. Neither did he suspect that whether he gave it up or not mattered little in the end, since destiny and I had already determined that the marriage should not be. The very thought of it lashed me to fury. Was she, this peerless woman, whose power over me was so great that for her sake I would have wrecked a world—was she to mate with an obstinate weakling of sixty, and give to his querulous, declining days the light and sweetness of her presence and smile?

On the day before the murder I received a letter from Lord Luxmore intimating his intention of immediately announcing his approaching alliance. I sent back my congratulations, and, burning with sudden hate, proceeded at once to make all the arrangements necessary for the frustrating of his purpose.

My arrangements were completed when, on the Tuesday morning, Lieutenant Wingrove had an interview with me with regard to his chances of winning the hand of Lena Luxmore. I knew Lord Luxmore too well to suppose that he would give his consent. But I did not attempt to dissuade the young man from seeking that consent. I foresaw that his interview with my obdurate friend would afford me the needed opportunity for safely carrying out my own designs.

I could have told Mr. Wingrove that Lord Luxmore's sanction or condemnation of his hopes would, in a short time, matter very little. But I did not tell him. I let him go down to Luxmore in total ignorance of impending events. With my nerves strung to the pitch of madness, I followed him by the next train. No one noticed me. It was clear that no sign of the terrible purpose within me was visible in my features or manner.

I knew every inch of the Luxmore estate, so it was not difficult for me to enter the grounds unperceived. I also knew—and had known for years—the habits of the household. I was perfectly aware that, unless anything unusual should have happened, my friend, the baron, would at that hour—about a quarter to six—be in his library. I did not, however, go to him as usual by the straight route through the front door. I had special reasons for not doing so on this occasion. Besides, I knew that the hasp of one of the library windows was broken, and I thought I might as well gain entrance by this swifter and more convenient way. I therefore approached the library door from the outside, and, pausing near the window, was conscious that an altercation was going on within the room. This did not surprise me; Lord Luxmore being always of a quarrelsome nature. I recognised the second voice as that of Lieutenant Wingrove. This stormy scene was in the highest degree favourable to my intentions, since the law would, doubtless, lay the onus of the coming murder on the person who was last known to be in the company of the victim.

It was now dusk. I temporarily withdrew behind a clump of bushes. It was well for me that I did so, for, a moment later, Mr. Reginald Luxmore appeared on the scene. He, too, listened by the window. Then he began to patrol outside. He did not observe me. I am a slight man, and years of detective work have made me an adept in the art of self-concealment.

The presence of Reginald Luxmore disconcerted me. I had not counted on such an obstacle. My impatience and irritation were becoming almost unendurable, when at last he took a wider beat, and disappeared for a sufficiently long time to admit of the accomplishment of my design. I slipped out from my place of ambush and again reconnoitred by the window. The library was dark. The angry voices had ceased. An unerring instinct told me that Lord Luxmore was in the room alone. I pushed open the glass door of the window and glided inside. Except for the firelight it was quite dark. I advanced without precaution, expecting the old man to greet me. No greeting came. As I drew near the upper end of the room I perceived by the firelight the figure of my friend lying upon the floor. I bent over him. His hands were clenched, and his features were distorted as if with mortal agony. He was not unconscious. As I stood over him he opened his eyes and muttered something unintelligible.

In reality, the arsenic was beginning to take affect upon him. It would probably not have killed him for awhile. A few more of Mrs. Vayne's surreptitious doses would have been needed to accomplish that end. But I, never dreaming that someone had already begun the grim work I was destined to finish, supposed that the baron was simply in a fit. With the seeming intention of relieving him, I unfastened his waistcoat and drew away the clothing from his chest. He watched me do it. I did not fear interruption, for my action was to all appearance a perfectly natural one under the circumstances. And, devoured though I was internally by the merciless hatred born of jealousy, my hands were quite steady. I bared his skin and injected the poison that brought him death. He was dead in an instant—without a cry, without even a murmur. I drew his clothes once

more over his chest, rebuttoned his waistcoat, and left him as I had found him.

That was at about six minutes to six—that is to say, between the departure of Mr. Wingrove from the room and the entrance of Mrs. Vayne to remove the empty wineglass.

I walked back softly to the window, and from the shadow of the curtain reconnoitred the grounds outside. I could not see well, for it was dark. But I was aware of the shadowy figure of Reginald Luxmore still loitering near at hand. I cursed him in my heart. Presently, in his pacing he rounded the bay of the window. Screened by the darkness, I then noiselessly glided out and crept away, threading myself a roundabout path among a wilderness of shrubs.

My purpose was to catch the 6.30 train—the same one by which Mr. Wingrove was to travel. I emerged into the narrow avenue immediately behind him. I had by this time somewhat relaxed my caution, and Mr. Wingrove heard my footsteps. He stopped and looked round. I glided behind a tree. When, about five minutes afterwards, I followed him out at the gate, the gamekeeper, Thomas Herbert, observed me. The darkness prevented him from recognising me—that is to say, from associating my name with my figure. But he saw the limp—this accursed limp, which, slight though it is, has betrayed me many a time. And afterwards he put the name to it—

But I shall come to this point later on.

Keeping always behind Mr. Wingrove on the road, I caught the train. No one heeded me. The third-class section of the train was opposite a dimly-lighted part of the platform, and Mr. Wingrove, as he afterwards said, was the only first-class passenger. But the third class passengers formed a little crowd on the platform, and I slipped in unnoticed among them.

I was in London again when the telegram reached me from Luxmore announcing the "sudden death" of

the baron. And so complete had been my precautions that no one was afterwards able to say that on that evening I had been absent from town.

I think everyone who was present during the inquest will agree with me that my bearing throughout that trying time was absolutely cool and self-possessed. I felt neither nervousness nor remorse. My infatuation for Lady Ormidale led me to think even this monstrous crime well done, since it saved me from the eternal separation from her which her marriage with the man whom I had killed would have entailed. My only object now was to divert suspicion from myself. To this end I occupied myself in accumulating evidence indiscriminately against any and every other person who could possibly be implicated in the affair. I felt no malice against any one of those whom I endeavoured to convict. But neither did I spare anyone—not even my friend Mr. Wingrove. Friendship, honour, peace of mind—all were as nothing before this love which burned in me, filling my whole being, claiming my every thought. During the inquest I fed this love by looking on the face of Lena Luxmore, and tracing there the superficial resemblance which chance had given her to the object of my adoration. I did not care for the suffering of others; I kept straight on towards my own goal—the evasion of suspicion and the ultimate winning of Lady Ormidale. I knew that, finally, she must yield to me. For the same destiny which granted her so terrible an influence on my fate would compel her also to obey the magnetic power which was drawing us together.

Not knowing that my victim had had a second enemy, I was overcome with astonishment at the discovery of arsenic in his body. Nevertheless, while inwardly incredulous, I resolved to support this theory of arsenical poisoning. In spite of the surprise occasioned by the condition of the deceased's left lung, I

did not believe that the true cause of his death would ever have been discovered. On its detection, however, I felt no alarm. Blind circumstance had heaped up motive and evidence so strongly against other persons that I felt it to be practically impossible that I could myself be suspected.

All went well for me until the night when the inquest closed. The verdict had been much as I expected it to be. But the body of evidence was deadly strong against Reginald Luxmore and his cousin Beatrix. I even foresaw their arrest and trial. It was with feelings of intense relief and satisfaction that I went away that night from the scene of my crime. This last day of the inquest had been a fearful ordeal to me, owing to the presence in the guilt-shadowed house of the woman for whose sake the shadow had been laid upon it. Every look, every movement of hers within those walls caused me a fierce, wild anguish whose memory makes me shudder even now.

I left the house that night by the narrow avenue as before, and for the same reason—that I was hurrying to the station. And as fiendish chance would have it, Herbert, the gamekeeper, saw me again. The circumstances were the same as they had been on the night of the tragedy. It was again dark; I was again walking fast. And again Herbert noticed the limp.

This time he knew me.

He came to me and challenged me. He even ventured to accuse me—me, Michael Dred—of the murder of his master. I laughed. But he insisted. He dared to lay hands upon me. But I awed him at last into quiet. He cried out that next morning he would reveal his recognition of me. I told him that I was swift to vengeance, and that if he so much as hinted at what had passed between us his doom would surely follow—and it would be upon his own head.

But well I knew that no vengeance, however terrible, would avail me after he should have spoken.

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A man driven as I was dares not hesitate. I resolved to make it impossible for him to speak.

That night I shot him with Reginald Luxmore's gun.

Now I have told all. Having purchased security at the cost of another life, I set myself to the gaining of my reward. I searched for Reginald Luxmore in the belief that he had been Mrs. Vayne's accomplice in the matter of the arsenic. Afterwards I travelled over Europe, following ever on the footsteps of Lady Ormidale. At first my devotion alarmed her. She said that a fatality pursued the men who loved her, and that she would never marry again. But I would not yield. Six months ago I followed her here. And to-day I have won her.

But it is too late. I am trapped. She was right in saying that a fatality pursues those whom she fascinates. After all my guilt, after all my suffering, I, Michael Dred, am to be cheated like a fool of my reward.

Driven to bay as I am, I have avowed all to Lady Ormidale. She recoils from me. I have lost her for ever. Only one thing, therefore, remains for me to do. When you come to me to-morrow at noon, Paul Wingrove, you shall learn what that thing is, and also the method by which Lord Luxmore met his death.

Remember—twelve o'clock!

CHAPTER LVII.

AT TWELVE O'CLOCK.

HERE ended the narrative. And, dropping the paper from his hand, Paul Wingrove sat in silent horror, vacant-eyed and pale.

The hours went by, and yet he did not stir. The glorious Eastern dawn broke and found him sitting there still. But at last the glowing light aroused him. He glanced at his undisturbed bed, and realised what had occurred, what terrible revelation it was that had changed for him the aspect of life. He thought of Lena Luxmore, and a sudden mist of tears softened the straining hardness of his sea-blue eyes.

"My darling! my darling!" he murmured. "So all our suffering has come from this—from the mad, remorseless jealousy of your dead father's closest friend!"

He rose and looked at his watch. Only three o'clock. How — how should he pass the dragging hours till noon?

Early though it was, he went out and walked about the sleeping city — walked for miles until he was utterly tired out. Then he returned to the hotel, and, sitting down, re-read the detective's narrative. He gazed astounded at the clear firmness of the writing. Never once, as it seemed, throughout the whole grim story, had the hand of the writer trembled. Paul feared also that never once had the heart of the murderer repented of its guilt.

Despite his weariness, he began to pace his room.

An unusual restlessness was upon him; an unusual excitement burned in his veins. He could neither eat nor try to sleep. He was conscious only of one longing—that the time would fly faster and bring round the hour when the fearful revelation that had been made to him should be completed, and the first step be taken towards the retribution that would be dealt out by the law.

Eleven o'clock! He could wait no longer. The address given him by Michael Dred was not far distant from the hotel, but his impatience and anxiety were growing intolerable. And a sudden fear had seized upon him lest the detective should escape him. He did not pause to consider that those self-incriminating sheets of manuscript were in themselves enough to secure the capture of Michael Dred—that there was scarcely a corner of the earth where Justice could not trace and follow him. In the burning glare of the hour before the meridian he hastened forth, maintaining his quick pace until he reached the street in which the detective lived. Then a strong, though inexplicable, reluctance came upon him. He could not go to the house until the appointed hour should strike.

Up and down the street he paced under the glowing Indian sun. Five minutes to twelve—four minutes—three minutes! He could wait no longer. He approached the house. He was passing through the gateway when, looking up, he saw the eyes of Michael Dred fixed upon him from a window above.

An involuntary shudder shook him. What was it that was so horrible in that sallow, bloodless face pressed thus against the pane, with its dry, wild, burning eyes gazing intently down?

Paul Wingrove stood rooted to the ground, looking up. He saw the detective's ivory-hued left hand steal up slowly towards his throat. Then the face at the window vanished.

Suddenly he recoiled in horror. [Page 325.

The spell that had been upon Paul was loosened. He sprang up the curving steps to the house door, and then rang loudly. An Indian servant answered the summons. Giving no word of explanation, the captain of the *Nerbudda* forced his way within, bounded up the short staircase, and rushed into a room whose door stood open. This room was empty, but from it another door communicated with an inner apartment. Fearful, he knew not of what, Paul tried this door. It yielded, and he found himself in a small room furnished like a smoking-room.

There, upon a divan, lay Michael Dred. He did not move at Paul's entrance. Pale with a growing fear, the young sailor approached him. Suddenly he recoiled in horror. He realised that in the few short moments which had elapsed since Michael Dred's face had vanished from the window, a tragedy had been enacted, in which the guilty man himself had brought about his own crime's retribution.

With one thin, ivory hand the detective held his scarf-pin—the famous opal heart set with brilliants—with its fine point buried in the flesh of his wrist. And around where the fine point pierced was a bluish swelling—such a one as had been noticed on the chest of Lord Luxmore.

Michael Dred was dead!

CHAPTER LVIII.

CONCLUSION.

ONCE more, as on the day when Paul had come to her only to bid her farewell, Lena Luxmore waited in the drawing-room at Cranleigh Hall alone. Now, as then, it was winter. Now, as then, the sea-logs burning on the hearth cast a dancing light about the darkening walls.

With all their sorrow and loneliness and doubt, those five years had not stolen a single charm from Lena Luxmore's face. The blue-grey eyes that lighted it were sadder, perhaps, than of old, but they were also tenderer. The mouth, too, was more serious, but at the same time it was more sweet. Now, as she sat listening and waiting, a delicate bloom tinged her cheeks, a happy light shone in her eyes, and a faint, soft smile of glad expectancy played about her lips. She had laid aside to-day the mourning worn so long for her unhappy father, and had clothed herself instead in creamy white—soft white that fell in clinging folds around her graceful figure, and was gathered about her throat amid cascades of lace. Here, too, a cluster of white lilies nestled. And above this mass of white her lovely face and shining hair rose with the beauty of a vision.

The dusk was almost emerging into darkness when at last the footsteps that she listened for came. Her heart beat quickly. The bright firelight showed the faint flush on her cheeks deepening to a vivid crimson. The door opened, then shut again. Unannounced,

Paul Wingrove had entered. He saw that tall, white figure rise and stand expectantly in the radiance of the glow from the leaping flames. Filled with the tender reverence of a great love, he paused, half afraid to go to her. Then she went to meet him, holding out both her hands.

"Paul!"

"Oh, Lena, my darling! my darling!"

Then came a silence that had deeper meaning yet than speech—a silence in which heart beat close to heart, and the suffering and sadness of five long years were forgotten in a single moment's joy. At last Paul said:

"This is for ever, Lena."

And she murmured to him in answer:

"For ever."

"It has been worth waiting for, my dearest."

"Yes," she said softly. "Ah, yes!"

"Was the waiting hard for you, Lena?"

He felt her quiver, as if with the memory of pain.

"Very hard," she murmured. "Beatrix will tell you how terrible it has been. It is she who has sustained me through it, giving me the comfort that once—in the old days—I sought to give her."

He bent his face nearer to hers. His hand caressed her hair.

"Let us forget the past, my darling. The future lies so bright before us—bright as we planned it long ago. They have asked me to go back to the *Berenice*. Shall I do so, dearest?"

A smile had illumined her face. But she shook her head.

"No, Paul. The *Berenice* would keep you away from me. But I am glad that they have asked you—glad and proud that your name is cleared."

"Lena," he whispered, "when will you take my name as yours? Let it be soon, darling."

"It shall be when you like," she answered simply.

A month later they were married in the little parish church near Cranleigh Hall. For generations it had been the custom for the members of the Luxmore family to be married at Luxmore; but the tragic associations of the place now made it impossible for this union to take place within reach of its shadow. Already rumour said that the old mansion was haunted. A year later it was razed to the ground.

Steps were secretly taken to bring Mrs. Vayne to justice, but she died before the proceedings had assumed a public form. For the sake of Lady Ormidale the facts of Michael Dred's guilt, and the true cause of his death, were never divulged. In these pages the solution of the Luxmore mystery has for the first time been given to the world.

THE END.

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